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The Courier
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THE CIRCUS

An international art

peoples and cultures

1 Mexico

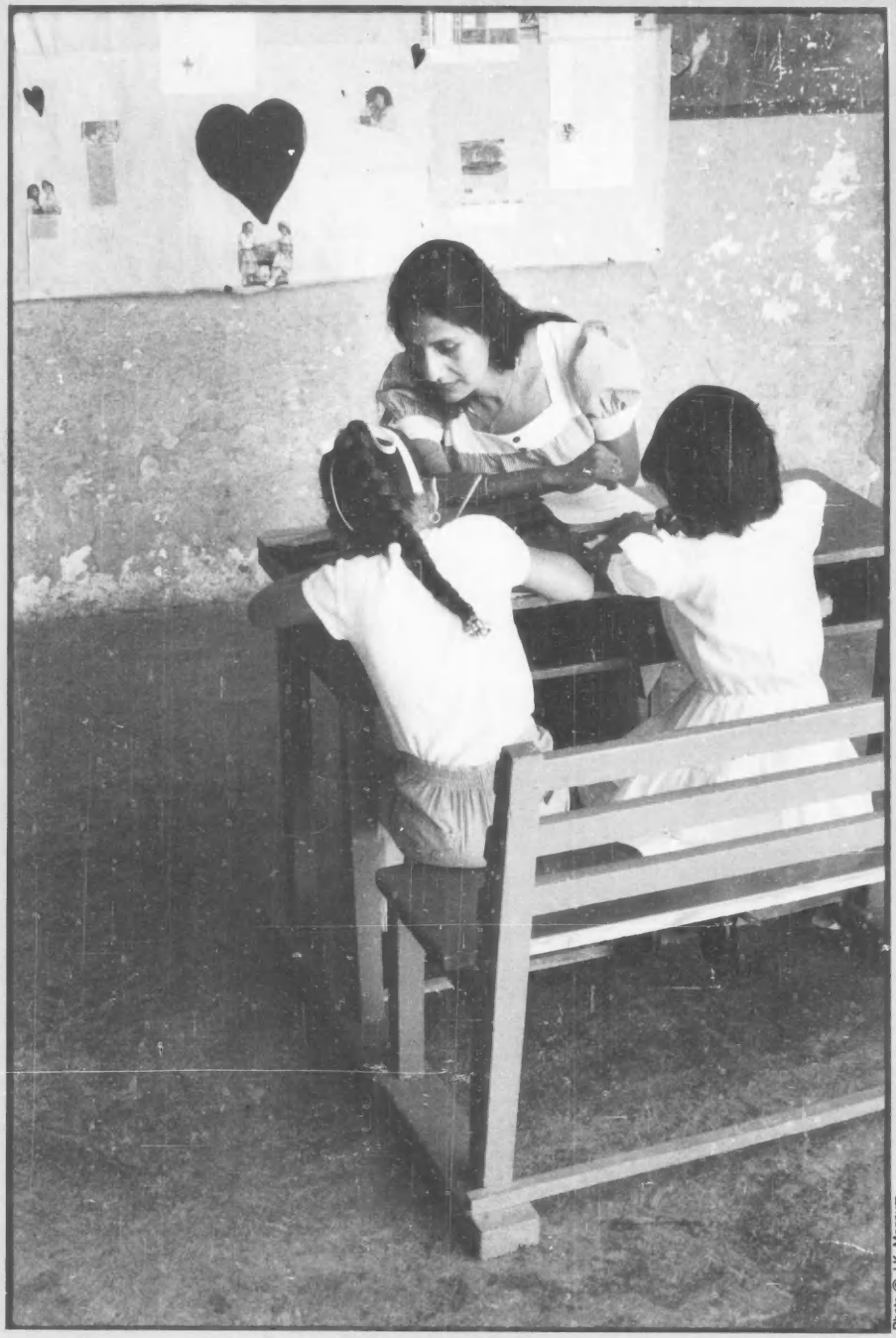

Photo © J.K. Magnum

Learning together

1988 marks the opening of the World Decade for Cultural Development proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations and placed under the auspices of the United Nations and Unesco. The Decade, which will end in 1997, was proposed at Unesco's World Conference on Cultural Policies (Mexico City, 1982) which strongly supported the idea that "culture constitutes a fundamental part of the life of each individual and of each community". The two main objectives of the Decade, in which Unesco will be playing a leading part, are to place greater emphasis on the cultural dimension in the development process and to stimulate creative skills and cultural life in general. As part of the Decade, the* Unesco Courier *this month launches a new feature on "Peoples and cultures". Above, two young pupils and their teacher in a village school in Mexico's Chiapas State. Later this year we shall be publishing a special issue entirely devoted to the World Decade for Cultural Development.

Editorial

The *Unesco Courier* offers its best wishes for 1988 to the readers of its 34 language editions throughout the world.

For many people young and old, the word *circus* evokes memories of a fantastic world of thrills and laughter, of the hilarious antics of colourfully costumed clowns, the dexterity of the jugglers, the agility and split-second timing of the acrobats, tightrope walkers with nerves of steel. But—perhaps because in some languages the word has pejorative overtones—the circus is all too often considered as a minor form of show business and its claims to an artistic pedigree are disdained.

Yet the circus is an art in its own right, a many-faceted art with its own history and originality. Everyone who has ever watched from a ringside seat knows that the circus, unlike some other forms of art and entertainment, is based not on illusion but on risk. At the circus there is, literally, no room for concealment; the preparations for each number take place before our eyes.

The circus as we know it today originated in eighteenth-century England as an offshoot of the art of horsemanship. Later its range widened to include a broad variety of disciplines and complex forms of dramatic and lyrical expression. The poetry of the circus and the symbolic image of the clown captivated and inspired painters and writers. At the same time the circus became an international art as artistes from different countries learned from each other and performed together beneath the Big Top.

But the universality of the circus is also, and perhaps above all, due to its fraternal nature. There is no fighting in the circus ring—except for laughter; no victims, except those caused by accident. Laughter, the language of the circus, is universal, and so are the emotions of admiration and trepidation to which it moves the audience.

This issue of the *Unesco Courier* is thus devoted to a supremely human art. It does not cover all the crafts and disciplines of the sawdust ring, nor does it analyse the problems which the circus is facing today. Instead it describes the conditions in which the modern circus was born and seeks to explain its undying popularity and eternal youth.

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Photo Held © Artephot, Paris. SPADEM, 1987

Back cover: Chinese acrobats of the Beijing Circus during a performance at Unesco Headquarters, Paris, in 1981
Photo Unesco/Michel Claude

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The Big Top

The modern circus, an international art

by Anthony Hippisley Coxe

MORE than 16,000 books are known to have been written about the circus: that is the surprising total of entries in Raymond Toole Stott's monumental circus bibliography *Circus and Allied Arts*. Historians say that the modern circus was invented in 1768 by Philip Astley at Halfpenny Hatch, near Westminster Bridge, London, and it seems highly probable that it was Astley, a former cavalry sergeant-major trained as a rough-rider, who first found that by galloping *in a circle*, while standing upright on his horse's back, centrifugal force could help him keep his balance. After all, most of the trick riders who appeared in the middle of the eighteenth century started as riding masters, steeped in the traditions of the rectangular manège.

But did Astley trace the first ring in London, and did this take place in 1768?

In his *Memoirs*, published in 1830, Harry Angelo writes that "Corporal Astley astonished the common people of Wilton ... when one day his horse *galloped in a circle*. With Astley upon its back, standing upon his head...." That event took place some 130 kilometres west-south-west of London; and since he was still a corporal the date must be circa 1761.

Of course one trick rider does not make a circus, but the reason why other showmen, such as jugglers, stilt walkers, acrobats and rope dancers, all found the ring an ideal place in which to perform, can be readily appreciated. Unlike the actor, musician, singer or dancer, the circus artiste does not *interpret;* he demonstrates some aspect of physical prowess. But that demonstration of agility or balance or dexterity *must be believed*. In the circus arena there are eyes all round to see that nothing is faked.

Photo © Izis, Paris

Erecting the Big Top. The Cirque Grock, Cannes (France), 1954

Hippodramas, trick riders and clowns

Small wonder then that such a spectacle was immediately appreciated all over the world; except in the United Kingdom, its birthplace. Here Astley and his rival Charles Hughes thought that by adding a stage to the side of the ring they could double the attraction. But the Spectacle of Actuality is killed if it becomes associated with the Spectacle of Illusion. If you know that a certain role is being played by an actor, you must have lingering doubts about the rope dancer's performance; is the rope really much thicker than it looks? Might there not be some unseen wires which help him keep his balance?

This misalliance produced a hybrid form of entertainment, equestrian drama. It did not survive for long in continental Europe. Nor did it find favour with the tenting circus proprietors in the United Kingdom. They wondered why on earth they should make travel more difficult and expensive by carting round a lot of unnecessary scenery, costumes and "props".

Halfway between hippodramas such as "The Battle of Waterloo" and the straightforward trick riding in the ring, came scenes on horseback performed with the greatest success by Andrew Ducrow. He was the first great international star of the circus. Yet of the score or more roles which he enacted on the back of his horse—"Indian Hunter", "Chinese Enchanter", "Tyrolean Shepherd", "Jack Tar" and so on—only one is still seen today: "The Courier of St. Petersburg", in which the countries through which a courier would ride on his way to Russia are represented by horses which pass beneath him as he straddles two more. It is easy to see why this survived while all others failed. It requires much more riding skill—agility and sense of balance—than acting ability.

Perhaps one other riding act can be traced back to Andrew Ducrow. Although Billy Bell is usually given the credit for inventing the bareback or Jockey act, in the 1870s, I believe that it can be traced back to "Le Jockeis (sic) Anglais" performed by Ducrow in the 1820s.

Be that as it may, the Jockey act was the one at which the British excelled. Apart from Bell, Wilkes Lloyd, Adolph Wells, Hubert Cooke and John Frederick Clarke all achieved international fame. Clarke was the greatest of all Jockey riders. Nobody took up the £1,000 challenge which he

Below, poster featuring the English white-faced clown Foottit (1864-1921), who introduced a number of innovations into the clown's repertoire. When performing at the Nouveau Cirque in Paris he created a famous double act with a Cuban artiste, Chocolat (Raphaël Padilla, 1868-1917), which established the classic partnership between the clown and his stooge, the auguste. His innovations in make-up were also widely imitated.

The Hippisley Coxe Circus Collection © Theatre Museum, London

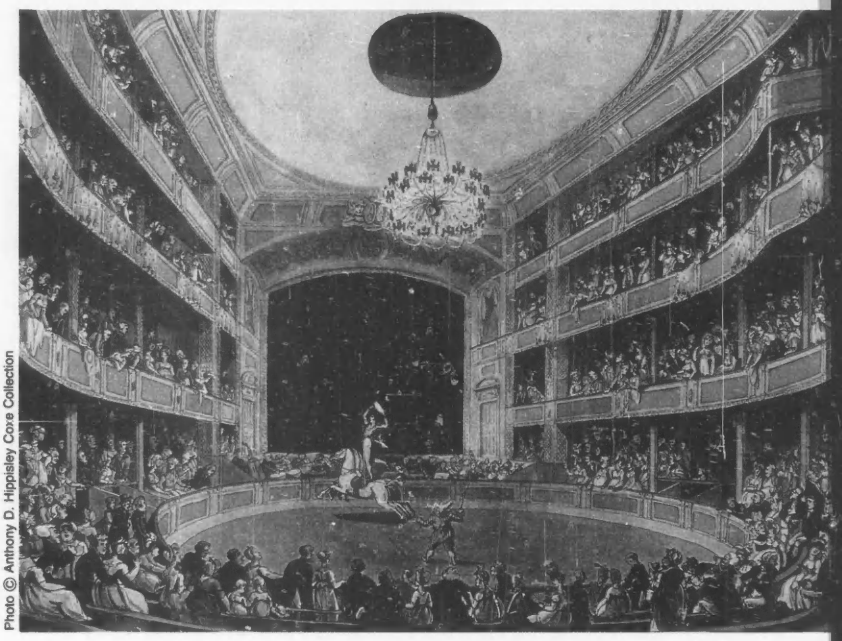

Photo © Anthony D. Hippisley Coxe Collection

Above, "Astley's Amphitheatre" in London as depicted in an early 19th-century print by Auguste Pugin and Thomas Rowlandson. The Amphitheatre was built by the British horseman and acrobat Philip Astley (1742-1814), one of the great figures in the history of the circus and reputedly the first man to think of staging shows in a ring.

issued. He was born in 1869 into a circus family whose founder is said to have been the model Charles Dickens used for Sleary in *Hard Times*.

Today, that circus is utterly forgotten. It was not a large show. The three partners, Powell, Foottit and Clarke, reckoned their share was worth £500 each. In the middle of the last century it would travel almost 4,000 kilometres in 32 weeks, visiting some 200 towns and taking £8,500-£9,000 in ticket sales.

Yet that one little show was the cradle of three of the most famous circus performers the world has ever seen. John Frederick Clarke was one. His cousin Ernest Clarke was the first man to turn a triple somersault, from bar to catcher, on the flying trapeze. The third performer, Foottit, was destined to become famous as a clown.

Clowns have always been an integral part of the circus. In a spectacle of physical prowess which produces a mental reaction—such as wonder, astonishment, apprehension or admiration—in the audience, a complementary note is needed—a mental concept which produces a physical reaction in the audience—that of laughter. And like the Jockey riders, many British clowns achieved more success in continental Europe than in their native land. The two outstanding examples are John Price (whose splendid portrait by Renoir is now in the Kröller-Müller collection in The Netherlands) and Foottit, who with his Black partner Chocolat became the toast of Paris at the Nouveau Cirque and was immortalized by Toulouse-Lautrec.

The epitome of style

Meanwhile, in France and Germany another aspect of riding had come to the fore. This was La Haute Ecole, or The High School of Equitation. I still find an *écuyère* riding side-saddle, wearing a habit, top hat, veil and a bunch of violets in her buttonhole, the very epitome of style. And no doubt this view was shared by most members of high society at the end of the last century. The Jockey Club had its private box at the circus in Paris; while in St. Petersburg the stables were specially scented so that the aristocratic patrons would not be offended by the smell.

The circus was better appreciated by the aristocracy in continental Europe than in the United Kingdom where, in spite of royal patronage, High School was rather despised by the upper classes. They preferred fox-hunting. The interest in dressage is a very recent phenomenon.

Another aspect of working with horses, at which the French and Germans were more adept than the British, was the Liberty act of riderless horses. Ernst Renz, Eduard Wulff, Albert Carré and, above all, the Schumanns had superb troupes of beautifully matched horses, trained to perfection.

Daring feats on tightrope and flying trapeze

So for 150 years the horse dominated the circus scene. But although it never lost pride of place, in the middle of the last century another influence was making itself felt. Jules Léotard's invention of the flying trapeze and Blondin's feat of crossing Niagara Falls on a tightrope focused the attention of the public on the individual performer, working without animals. The aerialist and rope dancer were followed by jugglers such as Paul Cinquevalli. Each of these disciplines eventually threw up the outstanding acts of all time, the Codonas on the flying trapeze, Con Colleano on the low wire, the Wallendas up aloft and Enrico Rastelli as juggler. Their actual feats may now have been surpassed, but not their sense of style.

By the end of the last century, wild animals were introducing an exotic note to the circus. Animal dealers such as Carl Hagenbeck of Hamburg were responsible. He is usually given credit for introducing the "gentling" system of animal training, but I believe the tradition is much older than that, stretching back into prehistory. Wild animals had been exhibited in the menageries throughout the nineteenth century. The wagon cages lined the walls of the tent surrounding the public. The great innovation came when the wagon cage, open bars all round with all shutters removed, was dragged into the centre of the circus ring. The next step was to build up the big cage in the ring itself.

And this brings me to the latest influence on the spectacle of the circus: the growing importance of apparatus. This movement started in nineteenth-century Russia, and I believe that it was the amazing artistry of their ordinary gymnasts on apparatus such

In the early days of the circus, displays of equestrianism dominated the scene. Below, the celebrated British trick rider Andrew Ducrow (1793-1842) as "Jack Tar", in one of his many scenes on horseback.

Photo The Hippisley Coxe Circus Collection © Theatre Museum, London

Photo © Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo, The Netherlands

The Clown **(1868), by the French painter Auguste Renoir, is a portrait of John Price, a member of a family of noted English circus artistes and one of the first "musical" clowns. Star performers at the Cirque Loyal in France, John and William Price are thought to have created the act in which two clowns play the violin while performing acrobatics and contortions.**

as the Roman Rings and horizontal bars that forced the circus to find a more spectacular presentation. So instead of performing on a beam, the outside edge of a giant moving semaphore arm was introduced. The high wire could no longer remain horizontal; it had to take on an oblique angle before our eyes.

Dressing for the occasion

That phrase "before our eyes" reminds me how important a role apparatus and accessories perform in the circus. Pierre Bost, in *Le Cirque et le Music Hall* (1931), has pointed out that whereas in the variety theatre the curtain rises to reveal the apparatus already set up, in the circus the component parts are brought in piece by piece and assembled before our eyes. One of the moments of delight for the aficionado is to watch an almost insignificant little man in a dressing gown and clogs adjusting the alignment, checking the level, testing the tension, and, when satisfied, leaving the ring only to throw off his dressing gown and make a magnificent entry, arm upraised in salutation, for all the world as if he was appearing for the very first time.

After such evidence of authenticity, would it not be absurd for the ring-boys to cover the apparatus with artificial roses to make it look like a pergola? Yet I have seen perches supposedly disguised as palm trees, and more than one aerial act has introduced a phoney aeroplane, which apart from looking silly also distracts by its noise.

This is over-production, which can also be seen in the costumes performers wear. They should be designed to enhance the act. Ever since Con Colleano made his entrance in Mexican trousers, wire walkers have copied him. They seem oblivious to the fact that, once on the wire, he ripped these trousers off—as he turned a somersault—to appear in the knee breeches of a bull-fighter, so that his magnificent footwork could be properly appreciated.

Tights and leotards still show aerialists to their best advantage, because there is nothing to hinder one's appreciation of their movements through the air, or of the fascinating foreshortened view of the human form seen from an unfamiliar angle.

In a High School act it is the unity of horse and rider that needs stressing. Therefore the formal classical costume, or the uniform of Le Cadre Noir, are ideal. Yet I have seen riders dressed in the red, white and green frills and flounces, ribbons and bows of Hungarian peasants, which immediately established a disunity between horse and rider. Because I want to see performers look their best, I do not like seeing dogs dressed up in crinolines. It merely detracts from their natural attributes.

I am sure that by now many readers will think I have gone too far—adopted a much too purist approach. What, you may well ask, of the rococo band wagons with their sun-burst wheels, the "oompah" music of the befrogged and shako-ed band, the spangles, the elaborately ornate show fronts with their parades ...? Is not all this "circus"?

Of course it is. It is the picture-frame which surrounds the painting, but it is not the painting it holds. It is a splendid setting for the spectacle, but it is not the spectacle itself. What I have tried to do is to get down to the fundamental principles on which the circus is built; why it appeals to everyone all over the world, regardless of age, income group, rank or class—the one truly international entertainment where nations are united. ■

ANTHONY HIPPISLEY COXE, *of the United Kingdom, has written many articles and books on the circus, including* A Seat at the Circus *(Evans Brothers, London, 1951, Archon Books, Hamden, USA, 1980). His extensive collection of circus memorabilia is preserved in the Theatre Museum, London.*

The 'Hundred Entertainments'

China's 2,000-year-old tradition of acrobatics

Photo © Chinese edition of the Unesco Courier, Beijing

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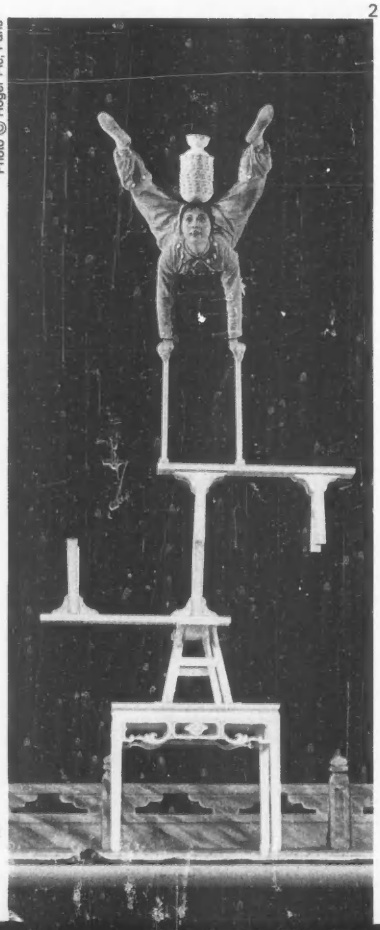

Photo © Roger Pic, Paris

2

THE art of Chinese acrobatics dates back nearly 2,000 years, to the Han dynasty. Combined with music and dance, the "Hundred Entertainments", as it was called, was a major form of amusement for the ruling classes.

In a work known as the "Prose of the Western Capital", the scientist and man of letters Zhang Heng (AD 78-139) vividly describes the acrobatic art of his time, from rope dancing and hand standing to juggling, pole climbing, and balancing on balls. A stone painting (photo 1) dating from the Han dynasty, which was found in the ancestral temple of the Wu family in Shandong Province, depicts a performance that combines acrobatics with folk dancing.

In the T'ang dynasty (618-907), a specialized "Training Workshop" was established at the imperial court to train acrobats, musicians and dancers and to organize shows comprising up to a dozen types of acrobatic acts. The T'ang poet Bai Juyi described some of these, such as "Dual-Sword Dancing", "Seven-Ball Jumping", "Rope Walking" and "Long-Pole Tricks".

During the Sung dynasty (960-1279), acrobatics gradually went out of favour at the imperial court, but gained ground as a form of popular entertainment. "Memories of the Eastern Capital", by the Southern Sung writer Meng Yuanlao, records over one hundred different acrobatic acts.

In the Yuan (1206-1368) and Ming (1368-1644) dynasties, many acrobatic skills and techniques were introduced into drama and opera. The so-called "Lotus Drama" included wire-rope walking, rope dancing, hand standing, turning somersaults on a ladder, jar-balancing, lasso tricks and jumping through fiery or sword-studded hoops.

China's first national acrobatic group, the Acrobatic Troupe of China, was created soon after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. Inspired by this group, local troupes were formed all over the country.

Household utensils such as the rice bowl are among the "props" used by Chinese acrobats. Balancing a "pagoda" of bowls on the head has long been part of their repertoire. A picture on a tile unearthed in a Han tomb in Nan-yang, Honan Province, depicts an acrobat standing on one hand with a stack of bowls on his head. In the 1950s, a famous acrobat named Xia Juhua created a new act which involved balancing a pagoda of bowls while standing on one hand, and supporting another stack of bowls between her feet, thus combining acrobatics and callisthenics. Her innovation inspired a wide variety of other "Pagoda of Bowls" acts (photo 2).

Spinning plates on bamboo poles is another graceful art which goes back to the T'ang dynasty and is still practised today (photo 3). Rope walking and dancing also have a long history. A huge mural in a Han tomb in Yinan, Shandong Province, depicts three girls jumping, dancing and standing on their hands on a thin rope with four sharp knives, points uppermost, on the ground below. Today, in addition to rope walking, wire walking is practised, either on a tightly-strung, slack or sloping wire. The tight-wire walkers specialize in somersaults, the slack-wire walkers in juggling, clowning and sword-fights, and sloping-wire performers slide or walk up and down a 10-metre-long wire strung at an angle of 40°.

The game of diablo, long popular with Chinese children, has been successfully turned into a circus act. All kinds of variations have been added to the game, which basically involves whipping a spool (the "devil") into the air and catching it again using a cord. The "Two-person Diablo Game", and "Swinging Around the Body", as performed by two Chinese acrobats, Wang Guiying and Wang Shuying, have added a new dimension to the traditional game.

The Lion Dance is a beautiful and typical example of an art form, known as "Mask Entertainment" in ancient times, in which people imitate or are disguised as animals.

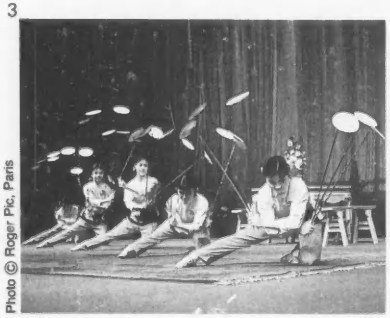

Photo © Roger Pic, Paris

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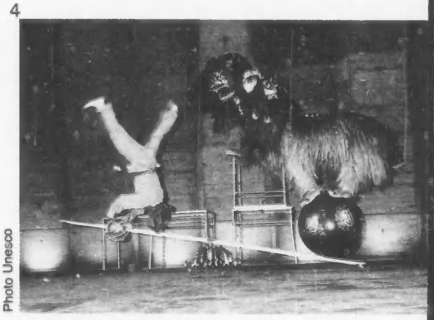

Photo Unesco

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by Huang Minghua

Bai Juyi, in a description of the Lion Dance as performed in the T'ang dynasty, wrote that the dancers wore carved wooden masks on their heads with gilded eyes and silver-plated teeth. In recent variations of the Lion Dance, up to four lions balance on a ball, sometimes combined with work on a seesaw (photo 4).

As bicycles are a very common means of transport in China, the skills of trick cyclists can be readily understood and appreciated by Chinese audiences. Although bicycle acrobatics only began at the beginning of this century, the technique developed rapidly, with the emergence of many different collective balancing (see back cover) and other trick cycling and unicycling acts. In the 1950s, the acrobat and trick cyclist Jin Yeqin introduced his "Clown on a Bicycle", which never fails to captivate audiences with its humour and wit.

Juggling with the feet is another ancient balancing skill which is still practised. Wu Zimu, a Sung dynasty writer, describes artistes juggling bottles, plates, urns and clocks with their feet. Peng Shiwang of the Ch'ing dynasty (1616-1911) recounts how an acrobat used his feet to juggle an eight-year-old child, a table, a wooden hammer and a nine-runged ladder. One of the hundred paintings produced by a Beijing artist to illustrate Ch'ing dynasty customs depicts one acrobat juggling a ladder with his feet while another balances on top (photo 5).

While people, ladders, stools and chairs are still used by foot jugglers, new acts have been invented using even more props: known as "heavy-weight juggling" with a table or an urn, or "light-weight juggling" with tubes or wooden plates.

Chinese acrobats have adapted valuable techniques from other art forms in order to develop new shows, some of which incorporate dance poses modelled on images from Buddhist frescoes in the cave temples at Tun-huang, Kansu Province. From sporting events they have borrowed the pole climbing technique (photo 6); other shows have been developed from work on the exercise rings and the horizontal bar; while springboard jumping, introduced into China in the 1930s, has evolved into a series of complicated and highly skilled acts, where a leap from the springboard can take an acrobat to the top of a six-high human pyramid, turning a backward somersault on the way. ■

HUANG MINGHUA, *of China, is a member of the Association of Chinese Acrobats and deputy editor-in-chief of "Modern Acrobatics" magazine.*

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Photo © Chinese edition of the Unesco Courier, Beijing

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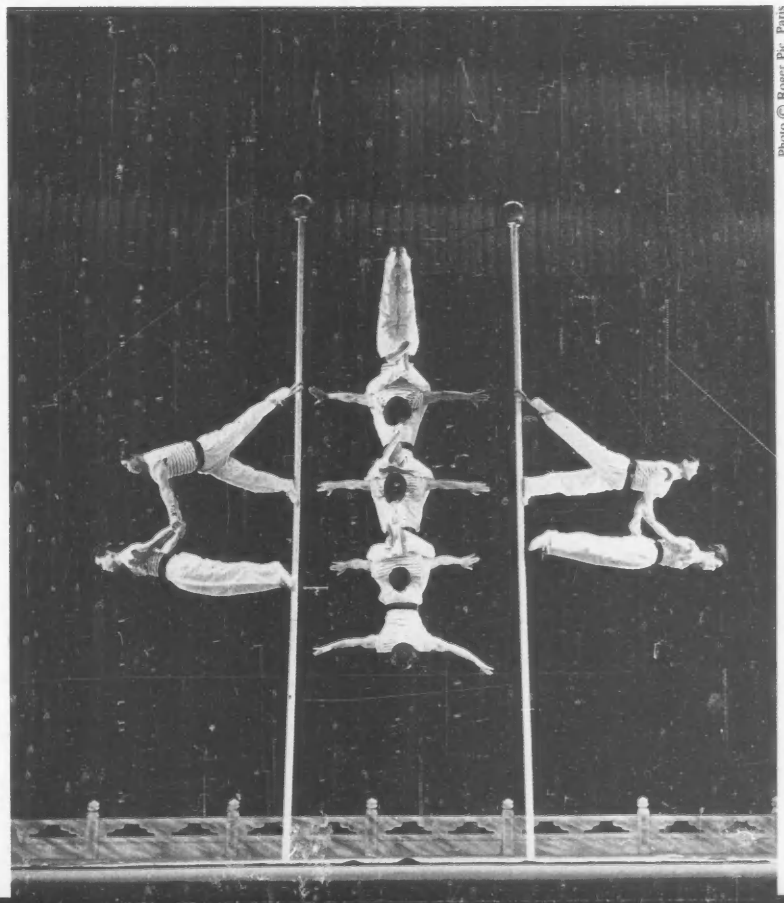

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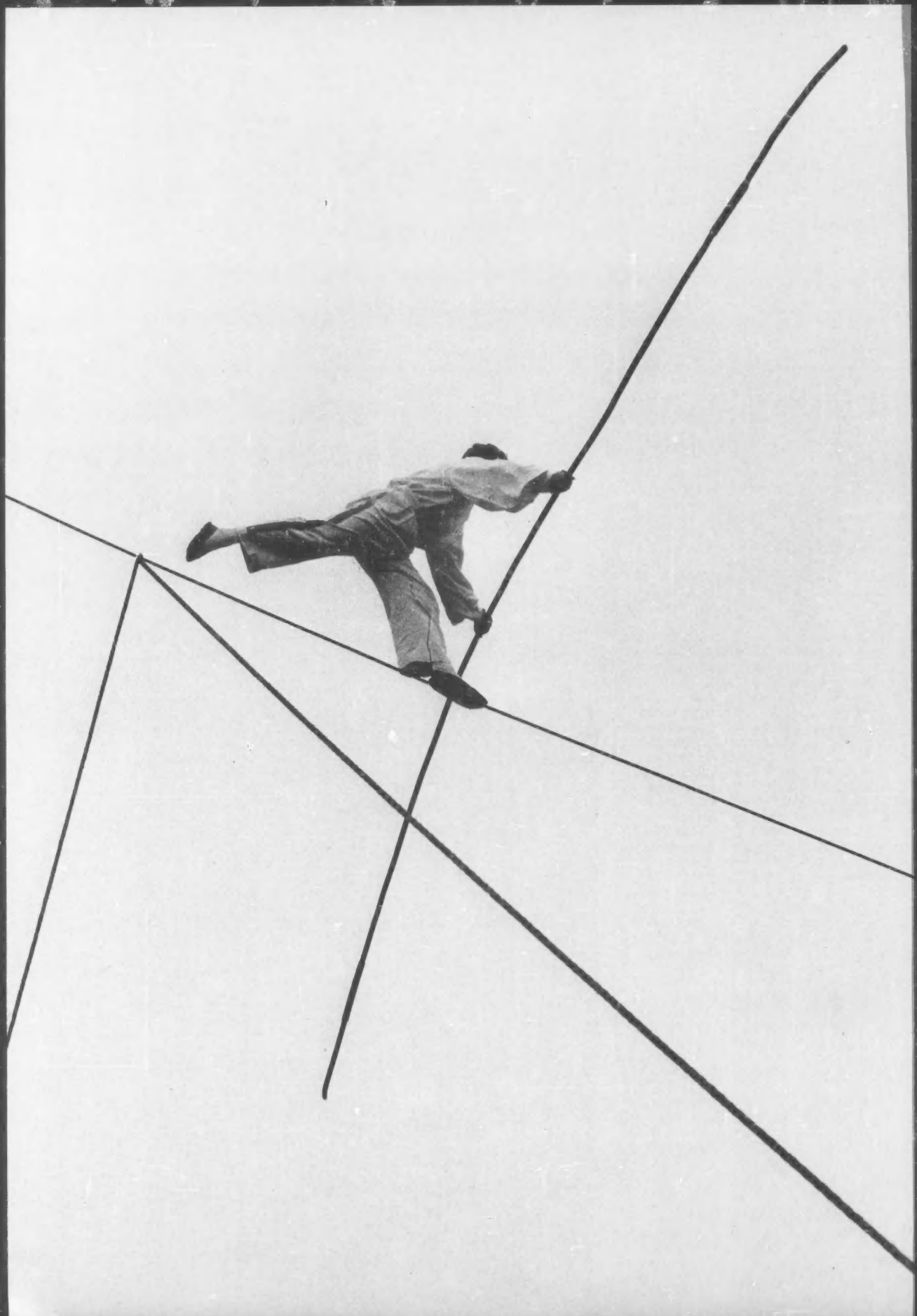

The art of the impossible

A repertoire constantly renewed by courageous, versatile artists

by Lucien-René Dauven

UNLIKE the circus itself, which can only establish itself in a new country by diversifying to adapt to a new public, the arts of the sawdust ring have developed in approximately the same way all over the world, owing to the proverbial mobility of the "travellers" and the determination of all artistes to outshine their rivals. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, there has been a steady stream of exchanges from one circus to another. A Franconi Circus number much applauded in Paris would be seen the following season in London, Copenhagen or St. Petersburg.

Jules Léotard of Toulouse, who invented the flying trapeze at the Cirque Olympique in Paris, and who was unknown before he made his Paris debut, had already worked all over Europe when he decided to go to New York. This was the crowning glory for a young man who had been improbably lionized during the Second Empire and who, impervious to ridicule, styled himself the "Antinoüs of the Trapeze".

The animal trainers who came on the scene around 1830, and the daredevils who appeared later, are not the only outside artistes to have been accepted by the circus. Other examples include the trick cyclists, adopted by the circus in the heyday of the velocipede. But experience has shown that although such artistes can contribute to the success of a show, they are not indispensable: the essential features of a circus are still those which made its name when it began to establish itself as an entertainment in its own right: horses and acrobats.

In the last century, the circus was called the "temple of the horse" by its most lyrical chroniclers, and was primarily a celebration of women trick riders and side-saddle equestriennes elevated to the rank of princesses. Lovers of horsemanship knew when to applaud at the right moment. The horse has vanished from everyday life, and connoisseurs have become rare, but equestrian acts, ranging from voltige and other forms of trick riding, to High School and "Liberty" horse displays, have lost none of their prestige. They are eagerly awaited, appreciated, applauded and often cheered. Just as it is possible to love painting without ever using a brush, it is possible to admire a trainer without knowing that *chambrière* is the name given to the long whip that he throws on the ground as he enters the ring, in order to show the audience that he does not need it in order to win obedience from his "pupils".

◀**Walking the high wire, Lagny (France), 1960**

Photo © Izis, Paris

Equestrian spectaculars

The history of the equestrian arts of the circus has been punctuated by major turning points (such as the introduction of High School riding around 1820) which can be dated to within a year or two, depending on the historian describing them. Although circus horsemanship developed rapidly in the second half of the nineteenth century, it had begun long before in Astley's Amphitheatre (see article page 4), with burlesque scenes acted out on horseback, early versions of comedy acts, and above all with the dressage interludes which gave the voltige riders time to get their breath between two exercises. The first trained performing horses were not required to do very much, but as soon as they were gathered in the ring, they became the distant and unwitting forerunners of the splendid equestrian spectaculars that are still the pride of the big circuses.

Carousels, with as many as sixty horses in the ring, are no longer fashionable, and nowadays acts with a group of twelve, or sometimes twenty-four, Liberty horses, faultlessly performing complicated manœuvres, have come close to perfection. The time-honoured traditional repertoire continues to be enriched by new routines smoothly linked under the invisible guidance of the trainer, who gives orders by gestures and movements so discreet that they go unnoticed by most of the audience. Some recent inventions such as the cloud of white mist from which the Lipizzaner horses of the Swiss trainer Frédy Knie gradually emerge, and the circling of the ring by a rearing stallion, a finale of rare beauty invented by the late Alexis Gruss, Senior, are on the way to becoming classics.

Poster announcing the first appearance of Jules Léotard (1838-1870), the inventor of the flying trapeze, at the Cirque Napoléon, Paris, in 1859. At first Léotard worked with a layer of mattresses below him, the equivalent of today's safety net.

Photo © R.-L. Dauven, Paris

Daredevils on horseback

In the circus, High School has a spectacular side unsought in the riding school. Using training methods that are criticized by masters of academic equestrianism, outstandingly talented *écuyers*, starting with François Baucher and his pupil James Fillis, adapted their art to the restricted area of the ring and invented new airs such as the *pas espagnol*, the *galop en arrière* and many others which are still popular today. Circus horsemanship is different from formal equitation. It is more showy, but it also shuns facility, and today boasts high-class artistes, men and women, who are elegant riders of splendid horses trained with rigorous precision. Unfortunately, there are too many others who turn High School in the ring into a shameless parody.

Voltige acts are military in origin, but voltige as practised by circus tumblers on horseback soon became quite different from that taught in the barracks. The traditional vaults and jumps of voltige were com-

Photo © Paul de Cordon, Paris

Alexis Gruss, Junior, and his brother Patrick, French horsemen and acrobats, leap to land astride a horse in their "double Jockey" act, during a performance at the traditional-style Gruss Circus in Paris. In this form of voltige act the rider combines acrobatics with feats of balance on a bareback horse, circling the ring in an anticlockwise direction.

bined with acrobatic feats, and the two disciplines were already merging when, towards the middle of the nineteenth century, two novelties from the United States spread through Europe: *voltige à la Richard,* which was performed bareback without saddle or bridle, and so-called "Epsom Jockey" work, a mixture of all known types of voltige in which the rider leaps off the horse and vaults on again, landing in a standing or sitting position. Pride of place, however, still went to exploits performed actually on horseback.

Acts became more varied when they were performed by two or three riders working together, and when troupes of six to eight people formed amazing human pyramids straddling four or five horses trotting neck and neck. But the store of new tricks was running out. Although we do not know for sure where, when and by whom the first backward somersault from horse to horse was performed, this exploit was undeniably more than fifty years old in 1930 when it was performed by the Franco-Chinese horseman Chotachen Courtault in the ring of the Cirque Medrano in Paris. It was hailed as a novelty ... for a time.

There may be fewer trick riders in the circus than in the past, but the best of them stand comparison with their predecessors. There are reasons to doubt whether any new acts will be devised. In recent years, novelty has lain primarily in a welcome return to tradition. Alexis Gruss, Junior, for one, has vividly revived such long-forgotten numbers as the "Courier of St. Petersburg", in which the rider, standing astride two horses, allows twelve horses to pass between his legs, snatching up their long reins as they pass. This number was created by Andrew Ducrow in 1826 (see article page 4), and had not been performed for some thirty years.

Leapers and tightrope walkers

Although equestrian acts delighted the elegant audiences who brought the circus into fashion, directors soon realized that the general public, who provided most of the takings, was less interested in these acts than in acrobats, leapers and tightrope walkers. The tumblers of yesteryear, now known as artistes "of strength and agility", soon came to the fore. Many of them became famous, including Léotard, the clown Auriol (who could turn a somersault and land with his feet in his slippers), Blondin, the tightrope walker, and Risley, who gave his name to an act in which one or more performers, lying on their backs, juggle the smaller members of the company with their feet (see photo bottom left, centre colour page).

They all had their imitators, intent on doing better than their models. Such rivalry did not exist in the days when professionals preferred to avoid one another and met only by chance when they were on the road, and it accounts for the remarkable development of the art of acrobatics as practised by the finest circus performers. But this progress would probably have been less remarkable and less swift had it not been for the training that has always been compulsory for circus folk.

Circus training calls for will-power, patience and courage (which the animal trainer Gilbert Houcke used to describe as the three essential qualities of the good craftsman), and for the future acrobat it entails a long, hard apprenticeship. Before specializing at all, he or she must achieve complete mastery of acrobatic jumps and balancing acts on the ground. It takes several years' practice to be able to perform a standing somersault correctly, or to maintain a handstand for two minutes. But once an artiste possesses these skills, the sky's the limit, and he or she can aspire to excel not just in a single discipline, but in several, or even in all. This versatility accounts for the continual renewal of acrobatics, which is more noticeable today than it was in the last century.

Acrobats who spend years learning an 'impossible' trick

"In acrobatics, the last word is never spoken, and the *nec plus ultra* never attained," wrote Georges Strehly, professor of philosophy at the Sorbonne and historian of acrobats, in 1903. His implicit tribute to the artistes of the last century is just as valid today. Since modern acrobats cannot perform any more extraordinary movements than those invented by their predecessors, they combine their tricks with others borrowed from different disciplines.

Nowadays, jugglers perform not only on the ground, but standing on their heads on a tightrope or upright on a galloping horse. Tumblers use stilts and are thrown into the air from a springboard; contortionists vary their dislocationary movements with hand-

Photo © Roland Smulders, Utrecht

The most critical moment of a breathtaking act. Perched on a monocycle balanced on a globe, the young Chinese juggler Fu Xiuyu performs a feat which won her the City of Monaco Prize at the 12th Monte Carlo Circus Festival in 1987.

to-hand interactions between partners, and some acts amaze even the most jaded audience.

Perched on a tall monocycle and pedalling with one leg in order to keep her balance on the top of a large wooden globe, which would begin to roll at the slightest false movement, the young Chinese acrobat Fu Xiuyu places four bowls along her free leg, and then flips them all into the air. The bowls fly in different directions and then, stacking neatly into one another, land in a fifth bowl that she has previously placed on her head. These are joined shortly afterwards by a teapot and lid, flung into the air in the same way. The feat seems almost impossible. But some day will another artiste make it even more complex by adding an extra difficulty? It is tempting to answer: "Why not?". In the circus, as in the sports stadium, records exist to be broken. And they always *are* broken.

The list of recent inventions that bear witness to the incredible virtuosity and inventive abilities of acrobats would be a long one. They dream of performing an impossible trick. It will perhaps take them years to do it, but they will succeed, and sometimes they will even be outdone by a colleague who has stooped to faking. Some very impressive numbers that win the loudest applause are of questionable value, because they consist of tricks that the performer cannot attempt unless he has first hooked to his belt the safety rope or "lunge" that will save his life if he misses his catch. In some cases, the lunge provides the acrobat with aid, more or less visible, which deprives the supposed star turn of any interest.

Fortunately, there are many other numbers which deserve wholehearted enthusiasm, even if they are less impressive and their merits are apparent only to those members of the audience who know the real thing when they see it. Fearlessness is part of the game, but no one goes to the circus hoping to see a fellow human mutilated in the ring. Safety precautions which do not diminish the quality of acrobatics are thus to be commended. However, if numbers involving deception cannot be excluded, at least let us hope that they are few, and save our respect (and applause) for acrobats who are wedded to their art and whose motto might be: "I am less flashy, but I don't cheat."

'A happy dream'

Is the art of acrobatics declining or developing? No acrobat will answer that question.

The growing complexity of the acts, the use of new apparatus and the replacement of one technique by another have depleted the ranks of those working in the less spectacular disciplines, which are closest to pure acrobatics, and which require only muscular strength and a keen eye.

But the circus is first and foremost a spectacle. No voltige rider catapulted upwards by two people clasping each other's hands has ever reached the fourth level, i.e. landed on the shoulders of the third man in a three-man column. But if the same voltige rider is propelled by a seesaw, which gives a powerful artificial thrust, he can somersault and reach the fifth or even the sixth level. Which of these tricks has the greater merit? It is difficult to judge, because it is undeniable that the second has a bigger impact than the first. The trend may be regretted, but it should not come as a surprise.

One thing is certain, however: if the achievements of the past cannot be compared to those of the present, the latter are no less valid than the former. Acts that were considered impossible at the beginning of the century, such as head-to-head balancing without a protective pad, have been performed, and no longer surprise anyone; Enrico Rastelli surpassed jugglers who, according to Strehly, would never be rivalled; and the forward somersault on a tightrope, the virtually exclusive master stroke of Con Colleano in the 1930s, features in the repertoire of all good specialists. One of them, Luis Muñoz, performs it in the "lay-out" or fully extended position, and no longer "balled-up", with his arms hugging his knees to his chest, like all his predecessors.

Riders, animal trainers and acrobats: in the ring, all remain eternally young, and thanks to them the circus is still, as Hemingway wrote, the only show that gives the audience the feeling that they are living in a happy dream.

What better reason could there be for loving the circus? ■

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The Editors wish to express their gratitude to Mr. Dauven for his assistance in the preparation of this issue.

The Little Top

by Jorge Enrique Adoum

Latin America is justly famous for the quality of its big circuses, but it is the poignant world of the small-time circus rather than glamorous Big Top spectaculars that inspired this evocation by the Ecuadorian novelist and poet Jorge Enrique Adoum.

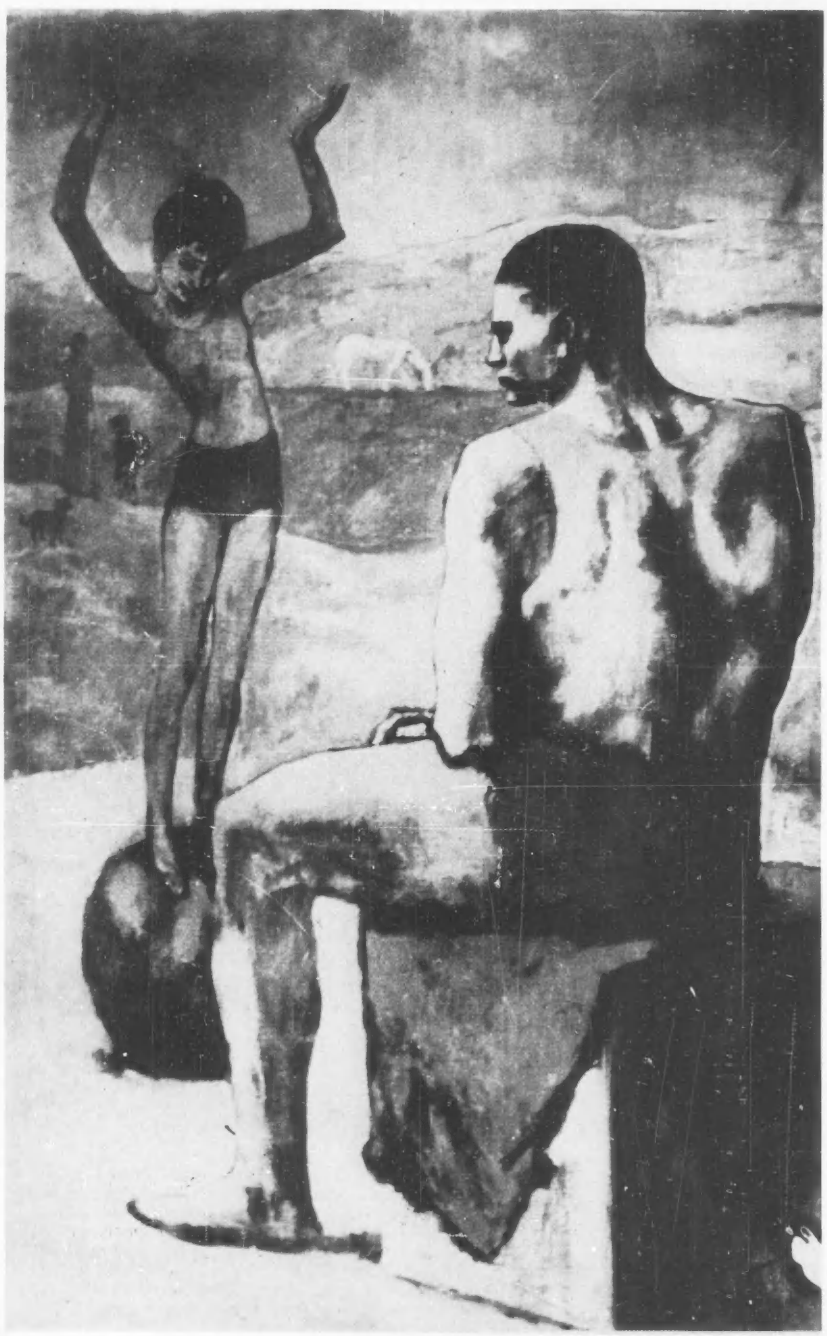


Photo © Edimedia, Paris, SPADEM, 1987

Pablo Picasso, circus-lover and a frequent spectator at the Cirque Medrano in Paris, painted many canvases on circus themes, especially during his "Rose Period". His *Girl on a Ball* (1905), left, is today preserved in the State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.

THE Argentine poet Raul González Tuñón penned the following description of the character whose name figures in the title of his book *Los poemas de Juancito Caminador:* "He was a pitiful negro, who worked in a circus. All circuses are poor, but this one was poorer than the poor. He had planned a 'magic act', in which he placed a skull on a table, with a lettuce leaf beneath its one remaining jawbone. Behind it, where the audience could not see, there was a rabbit eating the leaf, and this gave the impression that the skull was doing so. When the rabbit died, he lost his job. I don't know whether he just didn't think of buying another rabbit, or whether he couldn't afford to buy one."

The universal symbol of the circus—the tent—means poverty to the Latin American. Whenever the tent is mended or patched, ten new gaps appear, and when it rains the audience have to use their umbrellas. These gaps would be a godsend for the bare-foot children who cannot afford to pay the entrance money, were it not for the local police who, either because the manager or owner of the circus has greased their palms or because they are always ready to do anything that stops the poor from doing what they want, prevent them from entering what for them is paradise.

The Ecuadorian writer Raúl Vallejo once wrote a story called "The World's Most Patched-up Circus Tent" and a similar tent appears again and again in "The Triple Jump", a collection of texts by his compatriot Iván Egüez. But the image of poverty evoked by the circus tent is best captured by the Chilean poet Alfonso Alcalde: "The lion's coat was so worn that some friends had patched it up with bits of socks and old shirt-sleeves. There were patches of every colour—yellow, with purple or green stripes, or red circles. When the lion was pleased, it wagged its tail, which was tied up with string."

That is when there *is* a lion. For exotic animals, the main attraction of a circus, are very expensive. They have to be imported from Africa or bought in European markets; transport has to be paid for; a suitable environment must be created for them; they cost a fortune to feed. (When one of these

"real" circuses came to town, the street urchins, who had somehow found out in advance, used to catch stray dogs and sell them as food for the wild animals.) And so these little circuses, which try their luck on the outskirts of big cities, dwarfed by Ferris wheels and merry-go-rounds, are proud when they can show off an elephant or a bear in much the same wretched state as Alfonso Alcalde's lion, animals which the big circuses sell off because they can no longer stand on their feet.

The village circuses are even poorer and virtually sedentary, although they may travel short distances in a truck where the performers sleep beside their belongings—so much for the nostalgic image of a caravan of covered wagons where "Gypsies" live (for we always regarded the circus people as Gypsies, perhaps because of the fortune-tellers) with their children who never know for sure which country they were born in. Such village circuses are happy if they can produce a wild cat of some kind. The tamer, a kind of poor man's Tarzan in a makeshift uniform, usually has his eye on an equestrienne in a rival circus that has horses, while also setting his cap at the mulatto trapeze artiste, who is nearly always the owner's daughter-in-law or concubine. He is remarkable for his stature rather than his skill; he makes a great noise when cracking his whip in order to conceal his failure to overcome the animals' obstinate refusal to obey him.

The other animals the circus keeps are small, tame monkeys, inevitably dressed up as babies, which squeal as they jump, clamber up high and turn somersaults, and "performing dogs" dressed up as clowns, Gypsies or ballerinas, depending on their sex. The dogs' main activity is walking around with a hat in their jaws, collecting money from the audience, who are seated on planks placed on trestles. The money they collect is a kind of gratuity over and above the entrance fee or the price of a bag of candied peanuts made by the women in the troupe. (Sometimes a bigger dog, dressed in a tawny-coloured skin, serves as a tiger.) And in at least one village in the Andes there are hens with skirts or cloaks and even neckties, whose act consists of running madly round the sawdust-covered ring.

The performers, who are usually members of one family (to avoid splitting up the takings) are much the same as in any circus. There is the female contortionist and the bearded lady, the sword-swallower, the knife-thrower who more often than not misses the target, and the magician who pulls many a scarf and bunch of flowers out of his painted cardboard hat, but never a rabbit—which would be enough for the family dinner ... or could have kept Juancito Caminador in his job. The tightrope walkers and acrobats are particularly courageous since they know that the trapeze is a dubious piece of apparatus patched up with odd bits of wire, that the tightrope was bought second-hand at the frontier, and that there is no safety net to protect them from a sudden return to earth.

Some new additions to the repertoire indicate concessions to modernity: "Superman and the Seven Dwarfs", "Frankenstein's Coffin", and "The King of the Jungle" (who stands in for the tamer when the latter is dismissed by the owner or his son for making advances to the trapeze artiste), the hunchback who swivels round on his hump, and the dwarf who dances on his head. Until recently fakirs were another attraction. An exotic figure if ever there was one, the fakir was locked up with a snake in a glass-topped chest, where he fasted for thirty days. Some members of the audience thought that this was an inordinate length of time and yelled, "Some people will do anything rather than work !", obliging the police commissioner to certify personally that it was not a hoax.

The band, recruited from local musicians, enlivens the show with tunes of ineffable gloom. It's the same band that strikes up in the square late on Sunday afternoons after playing at the Sunday morning football match in the same square (sometimes there is only one team and the players wear ordinary clothes) and at bullfights where there are no spangled costumes and no matadors, and the bull careers round the square, knocking over the Indians and mestizos who have been drunk since the night before. A band which, wherever it plays, pours out the melancholy of villages huddled in the hollows of the cordillera and covered with a veil of dust that protects them from the drizzle. The grocer plays the cornet, the chemist the trombone, the muleteer the flute, the lawyer's clerk the saxophone, and the barber the clarinet. The butcher's boy beats the drum, consoling himself for his humble destiny with the knowledge that the death-defying leap would be impossible, or at least not so exciting, were it not for the roll of his drum. In the poorest circuses of all, the problem is solved by the cassette-player, a marvellous substitute for the gramophone, with its records that used to get broken after every performance.

Photo © Sylvie Mercier, Paris

Two Colombian aerialists, members of the *Los albarracines* troupe, performing at the Cirque d'Hiver, Paris

Here, as everywhere, the clown is the person who most fully expresses the way things are in communities that are victims of the system. He also expresses his own situation as a victim of the circus, for he does not belong to the family which owns it. They exploit him, for as well as clowning he has to drum up business, collect the entrance money, put away the props and sweep up after the show. Here more than anywhere, the clown is what the American writer Henry Miller called "fate's pawn". Although some people prefer to see him as the village idiot, the shoe-shine boy in the market, or a stammering beggar, rather than, like them, the victims of others or of fate.

In big, well-equipped international circuses, the clown's attire has to "look" torn, his hat and shoes must "suggest" a tramp's outfit. But in our sort of circus, both in everyday life and on the night when there is a show, the clown (in remote villages an artisan or peasant, in the city an itinerant who goes from circus to circus), has his elbows and knees showing through holes in his shabby old clothes whose patches are not part of the costume, but marks of poverty. Slapped in the face, kicked about, spat at, the poor wretch is a compendium of the mistakes and stupidities of humanity. He walks like a blind man, bumps into walls, can't grasp explanations, doesn't hear what people say to him. He is a blockhead made fun of and exploited by another blockhead, because it takes two to represent society and the system. The other blockhead blows him up and then deflates him, plays tricks on him, fills his hat with water, and pulls away his chair so that he sits down with a bump. And the children laugh. After all, why shouldn't they laugh at the misfortunes of this hapless wretch if it helps them get even with a life in which there is little to laugh about? And even the adults laugh because some of them see their own likeness in the clown. For everyone knows that the other chap, the rascal, the bully, the villain, never makes people laugh.

Such are the images of gloom and poverty evoked by the kind of circus that does not come to town headed by a parade of acrobats riding exotic animals, while the big band plays. During the interval it's impossible to buy a photo of a pretty girl walking on a ball bigger than she is (for one thing the girl who performs this act isn't pretty; for another, balls are so expensive that she has to use an empty barrel smelling of liquor). There is no printed programme. Sometimes there are no tickets; you just hand over your money at the entrance and walk in. But the main thing is that such circuses bring poor people a fleeting moment of happiness on a Sunday afternoon. For next morning, when the farce of the system starts all over again they too will have to contend with cuffs, kicks and shabby treatment, and perform their own leaps into the void and their own balancing acts as they move forward along an unsteady and endless tightrope. ■

JORGE ENRIQUE ADOUM, *Ecuadorian writer, has published several volumes of poetry, including an anthology,* No son todos los que están: Poemas (1949-1979), *a novel,* Entre Marx y una mujer desnuda, *and two plays,* La subida a los infiernos *and* El sol bajo las patas de los caballos *(published in English as* The Sun Trampled beneath the Horses' Hooves).

GROCK

Self-portrait of a clown

by Leonid G. Engibarov

I trained at the Moscow Circus School, where my teacher was Yuri Petrovich Belov, a young director passionately interested in the art of the clown. We created my character together. Inventing a character is the trickiest of all the problems facing a clown. An actor on the screen, on the stage or even in music hall is in a very much easier position, because his character is described in writing by an author, whereas the clown creates his own character.

All sorts of questions had to be answered. For example, should my character wear a clown's make-up? We considered in turn the make-up and masks worn by the greatest comic artistes that we knew. What ideas could they give us for the figure that we were creating? We were particularly drawn to the white face of Grock, the great Swiss clown. I found this make-up, similar to the classical mask of Pierrot, very attractive.

On mature reflection, we nevertheless decided against a variant of this type of mask, which strongly emphasizes the sad eyes of the person acting the clown. But before deciding on the make-up, it was necessary to work out the personality of my character. Who was he?

At Belov's suggestion, we gave free rein to our imagination and carefully noted everything that occurred to us in connection with our character, whom we called Lionia Engibarov, since I had decided that, initially, he would be loosely based on myself.

Our Lionia was a youth of eighteen or nineteen, whose life had followed a similar pattern to my own. Like me, he had been born in Moscow. He did not have very pronounced national characteristics, but was clearly of Eastern origin. We strove to understand his personality, his likes and dislikes, his view of the world, his tastes, his inclinations and everything that made him an individual in his own right. We gave him a child's curiosity and thirst for knowledge, both of which would very often lead him into scrapes.

Here we already had material for comic misunderstandings. But we had to give much more emphasis to the character's comic side. I was determined that Lionia should be a very modest person. He performs the most complicated circus feats without turning a hair. We thought—and events proved us right—that there was strong comic potential in this.

Lionia's personality gradually took shape. Here was a comic hero who made people laugh without malice. We agreed that he should be a sort of gallant knight, always ready to fly to the rescue of ladies or underdogs. Even if Lionia did not look like a tough guy, he had a certain strength of character.

Finally we had to fit him out with clothes. It was essential that his costume should not be a hindrance to juggling or acrobatics, and so it had to be functional. But it also had to express the character's personality. Lionia wears his father's outsize shoes, a feature that we borrowed from our beloved Chaplin. His trousers and the braces that hold them up were an idea of my mother's. "Dressed like that, he'll look a real scallywag," she said.

Then we spent a long time looking for a shirt, and finally opted for a striped singlet that makes him look even thinner than he is. We tried out several dozen types of headgear, from caps to berets, before deciding that what suited Lionia best was the most ordinary type of hat, bought across the counter. We tied a silk scarf around his neck and put a slapstick in his hands to show clearly that he was a clown, and we decided that he would enter the ring walking perfectly normally.

The image continued to develop as we worked. The young fellow still had to mature, not physically, but psychologically. However, if my invented character was to mature, I had to develop spiritually as an artiste. To be a brilliant juggler and capable of doing handstands is not enough, nowadays, to make a clown worthy of the name. The artiste must, as the Czechs say, be "drawn out of himself". In the way that he handles a character, the artiste gives immediate, perceptible expression to the way he relates to it. And this is precisely what I want: the audience must always be aware, underneath Lionia's comic guilelessness, of my own personal reactions to what happens to him.

I have often been asked why I never speak in the ring. It is not because I can't but because the circus is primarily a visual spectacle. It seems to me that people go to the circus to "watch" a performance and not to "hear" one. I am silent also because I am very fond of mime. I love its language, wordless yet so remarkably expressive.

The subject of a circus mime must be simple, like a children's fable, without being unduly "primitive". A true fable is a fount of wisdom; its meaning can always be clearly grasped. A person performing a circus mime must aim at the same kind of clarity. As a rule, I create my own interludes and scenes. How do I get the ideas for my comic turns? There is no hard-and-fast rule. It varies according to the circumstances. However, I always start by writing a little story for my character. I imagine all sorts of adventures that he might have, and I place him in a wide variety of situations.

I sometimes feel that I have "said it all" and used up all my ideas. Only fresh emotions can help at such a time, whether experienced directly in life or through the mirror of art. When such moods descend on me, I spend a lot of time strolling around, I travel and I voraciously watch films and shows. Not necessarily comedies. Grieg and Beethoven are as indispensable to a comic artiste as Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton or Fernandel. I let myself be guided by my curiosity. I listen to music whenever I can. I go to exhibitions and art galleries, and visit painters in their studios. I have a craving for poetry. I leaf through my collection of character sketches and caricatures.

One day I happened to hear a blues sung by that incomparable Black American singer Louis Armstrong. I was moved by the poignant sadness of the melody. Almost against my will, a subject for a little story crept into my mind: the story of a sad acrobat. He has known so many failures that even when he has become an artiste of great prowess, dexterity and talent, he cannot believe in his own success. And this lack of confidence makes him very touching. I fleshed out this theme with the help of a few tricks and stunts.

Lionia walks towards the audience with his head bent, his hands in his pockets. He gives the traditional salutation and then, to the slow tempo of this sad blues, he starts to go through a complicated routine. At the end, he walks towards the ring doors, as

Leonid Engibarov (below) believed that "the clown always does everything seriously. Of course, that's not to say that he doesn't want to be funny. On the contrary, his aim is to make people laugh. But the true comic does this without trying to raise a laugh at any price."

Photo © Izis, Paris

◀ **Left, the great Swiss clown Grock (Adrien Wettach, 1880-1959) waits to go into the ring at Toulon, France, 1954**

Photos © Vladimir Paniarski, Moscow

"Having chosen to make mime my life's work, I assembled a collection of themes for pantomimes and sketches." Above, Engibarov strikes a pose in a mime sequence entitled *The Crocodile*.

dejected as ever. The ringmaster urges him to come back and take a bow. But the young man still cannot believe that his art can give pleasure to anyone, and he shakes his head. Then the audience warmly applauds Lionia, to encourage him. And when he appears for the next turn, happy and beaming, the audience bursts into even louder applause.

It always gives me great satisfaction as an artiste when I succeed in mastering a new genre or in performing an original trick. But I never, never do a number in the ring just for its own sake. I always make sure that each trick is woven into a story that matches my character.

One day, somebody told me about skipping with a rope, not in the usual upright manner, but lying down. I decided to practise this trick, which greatly appealed to me. But for a long time I was unable to work it into an act, since I could not think of a suitable pretext. Skipping ropes and urchins go very well together, I reasoned. But how could I bring in skipping lying down?

And then I had an idea. The ringmaster is annoyed when he sees that rascal Lionia skipping during the performance, and takes away his rope. But Lionia has another in reserve. The ringmaster confiscates that one, too, and then a third. This walking embodiment of discipline finally gets really angry and forces the kid to turn out his pockets. But Lionia acts stupid and pretends not to understand what he is supposed to do. I get as much as I can out of the business of emptying my pockets, first the right, then the left, according to Chaplin's principle of milking a gag for the last drop of laughter. The audience watches the scene closely, and it does not occur to anyone that I may have another rope ... in my hat. This is a wonderful surprise for everyone.

But what a pity—the rope is too short. What is to be done? I heave a disappointed sigh, and then I hit on the solution: I stretch out on the floor and start to skip lying down. When the ringmaster rushes towards me yet again, I quickly knot the rope around my neck like a tie. My whole attitude seems to be proclaiming: you can't touch me, it's only my tie. Then I march out with my nose in the air.

Improvisation is another way of creating an act. I have a very soft spot for our wonderful clown Karandash, who is famous for his improvisations. And although I consider the best "improvisation" to be the one that can be rehearsed beforehand, I am willing to improvise if the opportunity arises.

One day, when I was working one of the many interludes in the programme, the ringmaster whispered in my ear: "Spin it out." This meant that there was a problem behind the scenes and that the audience had to be kept amused. I had neither my slapstick nor my hat, both useful props in such cases. But I noticed that the props manager had placed a microphone on the ring fence, ready for the next number.

As I walked towards the microphone, I had no idea what I was going to do. But as soon as I had it in my hands, an idea came to me and I burst into an impassioned speech ... which did not have a single word in it. I suddenly realized that the microphone was not working. I tapped it and blew into it. Meanwhile I was desperately thinking: "What next? What next?". "Step on the wire", the voice of inspiration suddenly suggested. Remembering the illusionist's trick of distracting the audience's attention by a false movement, I raised the microphone as if to hold it closer to the light, and thus made the audience look up, while in the meantime I surreptitiously trod on the wire. From then on it was all plain sailing. To my great surprise, I had discovered what was wrong.

I shifted my foot and tapped again on the microphone: everything was working! I took up the stance of an orator. And suddenly I was overcome by stage-fright. I opened my mouth, but no words came. In a panic, I shot a glance at the ringmaster. He gave an encouraging sign. I signalled to him that I was afraid, and on a sudden impulse I held the microphone to my heart like a stethoscope. The rest followed naturally: I started to tap gently on the microphone with one finger, and the whole circus heard the rapid "toc-toc" of my racing heart. Then I had the idea of testing the ringmaster's heart. It was beating to quite a different rhythm, at long intervals: "boom ... boom ... boom". The audience burst out laughing. And at that moment we received the signal that behind the scenes everything was now in order.

Later, I developed and improved on what had come to me by chance. I concentrated on showing my anxiety about the irregular rhythm of the ringmaster's heartbeat. I am dismayed as it begins to beat more and more slowly and finally stops. In desperation, I look everywhere for his heart, placing the microphone over various parts of his body. But in vain. I shake his head to and fro, peer into his eyes and burst into despairing sobs. Then, with a smile, the ringmaster suggests that I should look for his heart on the left, and when the microphone finds it and I hear it beating perfectly normally, I am filled with childlike joy. ■

LEONID GEORGIEVITCH ENGIBAROV *(1935-1972), of the Soviet Union, was one of the first modern clown-mimes. A skilled juggler, tightrope walker and acrobat, he also performed in films, pantomime and music hall, in sketches that he had written himself. This article is an edited version of a contribution to "The Art of the Clown", published in 1969 in the USSR.*

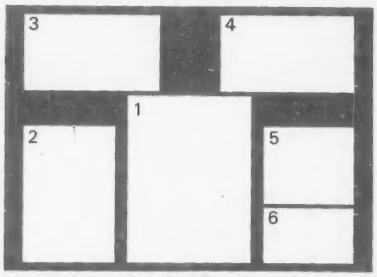
Colour pages

Colour page opposite

A "spec" or pantomime in progress during a recent season of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, America's largest circus (see article page 30)

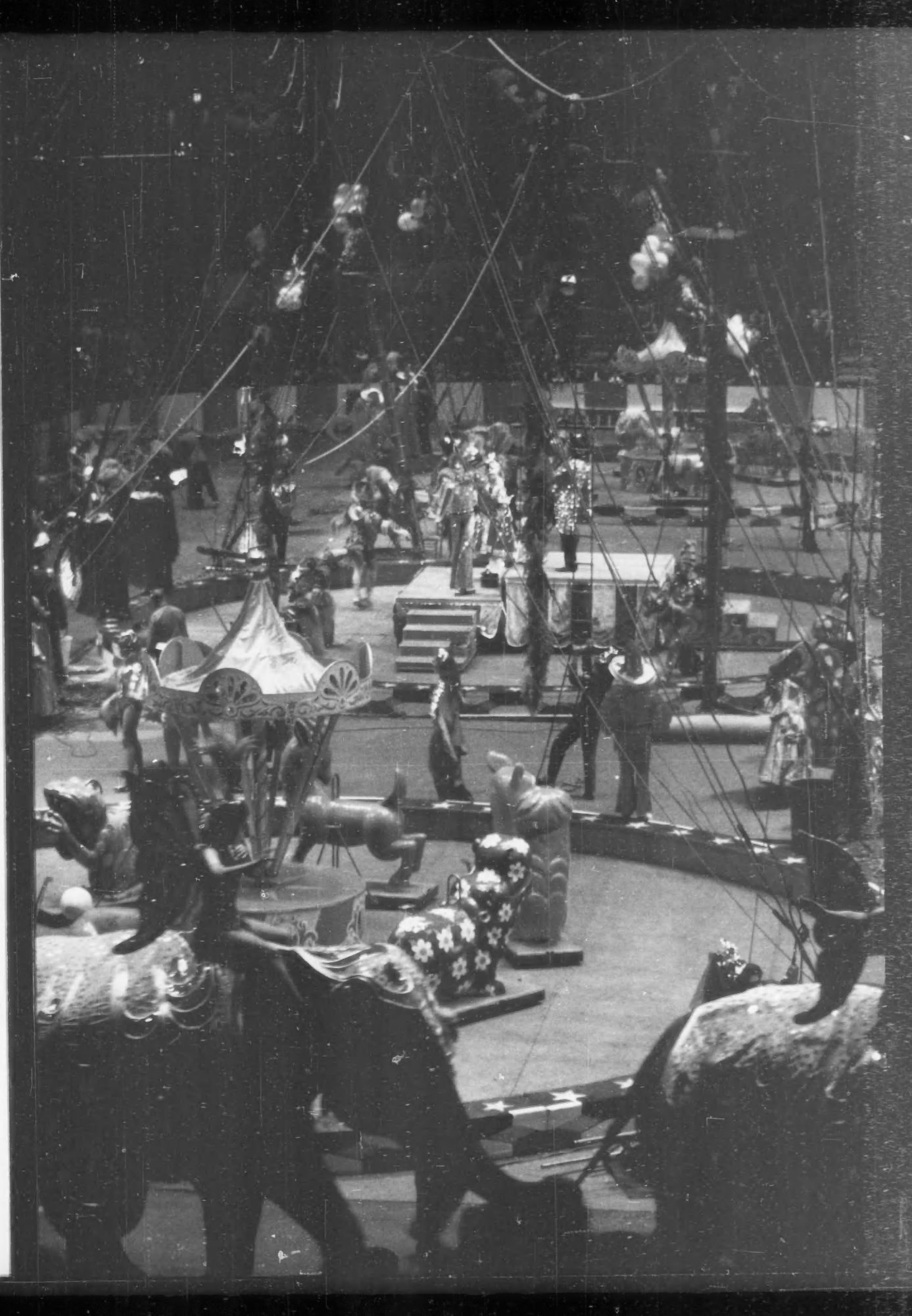
Photo © A.H. Saxon, Fairfield, Conn., USA. All Rights Reserved

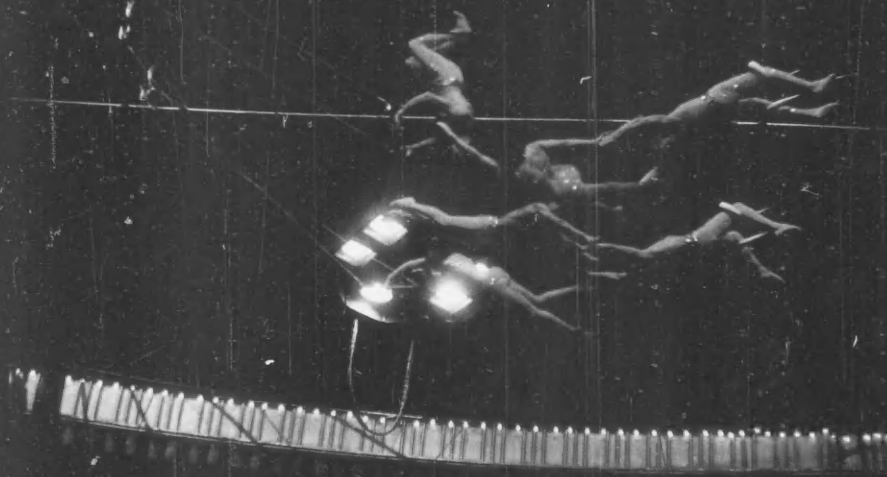
Centre colour pages

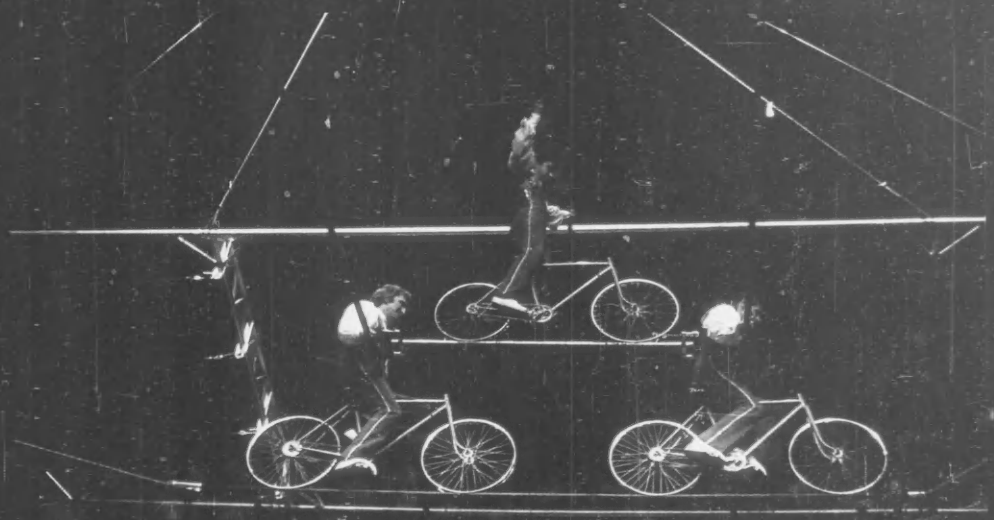


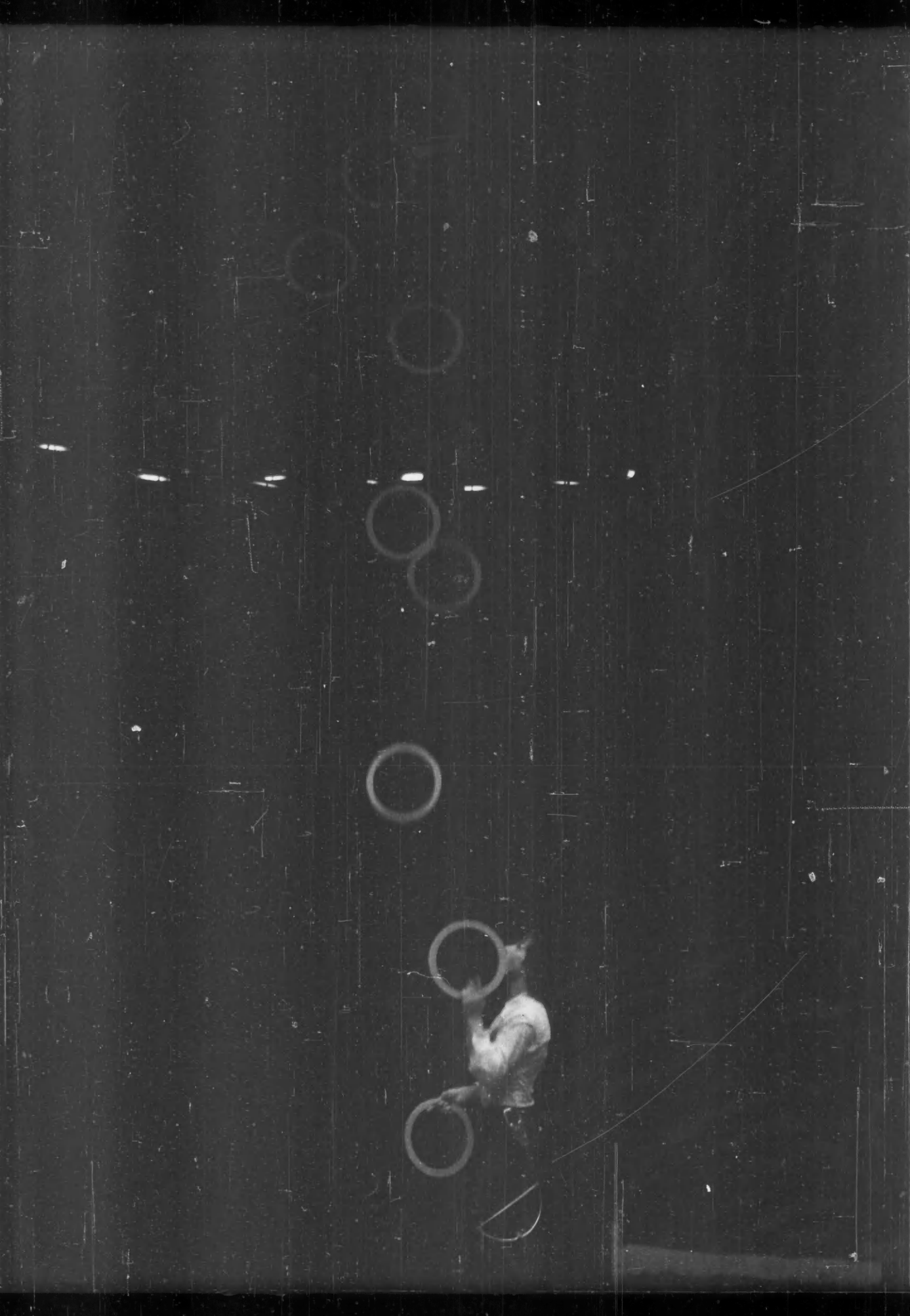
(1) A clown in brightly coloured costume decked out with badges entertains a young member of the audience at the annual clowns' convention at Bognor Regis (UK). (2) A troupe of Egyptian artistes at a dramatic moment in a Risley Act, in which performers lying on their backs juggle smaller members of the company with their feet. (3) The Palacios, Mexican flying trapeze artistes in action at the Benneweis Circus (Denmark). (4) The Diables Blancs, a troupe of European funambulists whose skills won them an award at the Monte Carlo International Circus Festival. (5) Martine Gruss leaps the garters in a classic pad horse act. (6) Rearing Lipizzaner horses of the Swiss National Circus under the direction of Marie-José Knie. The white-coated Lipizzaners, bred as early as the 16th century in Austria, are particularly suited to High School exercises.

1. Photo Jeremy Nicholl © Impact, Paris
2. Photo © Sylvie Mercier, Paris
3. Photo © Sylvie Mercier, Paris
4. Photo © Sylvie Mercier, Paris
5. Photo © MONKA
6. Photo Weiland © Rapho, Paris









Last winter, Soviet clown Anatoli Martchevski gave this ringside interview to the Unesco Courier *while touring France with the Moscow Circus. A juggler and acrobat as well as a clown, the talented Martchevski (born 1948) is a man of many parts whose activities in the arts range from directing films to writing children's books.*

The profession of laughter

Have you wanted to be a clown ever since you were a child?
Since even before I was a child !

Why were you attracted to being a clown?
It's one of the most human professions there is. The clown is the personification of laughter. But it's a kind of laughter which doesn't belittle human dignity. A clown doesn't lose his dignity when he makes the audience laugh. People see him as their equal or as someone they can identify with. He has become the hero of a show.

When you say "audience", are you thinking mainly of children?
Children are the most honest and genuine audience. Through them, you can test the quality of an act and work out exactly how to make your entrance. Adults, on the other hand, react in terms of their preconceived ideas about the world.

You don't have a red nose, you don't wear a grotesque costume ... you have hardly any make-up. How would you define the type of clown you play?
In the Soviet Union it's known as the modern clown, to distinguish it from classical comic figures such as the auguste and the white-faced clown. For us the clown is first and foremost an artiste who comes into the ring to express his own personality to the public. He does not represent a fictional character. Nor is he a traditional type. It's his real self, an individual human being, that emerges from behind his make-up.

Is the modern clown, as you see him, very different from the auguste?
Yes, each has a particular psychology and sense of humour. Auguste is the archetype of the character for whom nothing goes right: he is in thrall to the bossy, intellectual and rather narrow-minded white-faced clown. But I don't want to play auguste as in the past, in the classical manner. I'll keep his outward appearance, the "mask", as well as his kindness and love of mischief, but I'll add my own inventions. I should like to create a blend of the classical and modern art of clowning. My "rose" act can be performed as an auguste, for example. But that would mean mixing up different types of clown. If I play a modern clown, then it's me, Martchevski, with no disguise, but if I play auguste, then it's auguste acting and not Martchevski.

Will you always be a clown?
Yes, because I want always to be a man. For me there is no difference between the clown and the man. I am the same person now, talking to you, as I am in the ring.

How did you become a professional clown?
By chance. Big circuses didn't visit the little Ukrainian town where I grew up. I was eighteen when I first went to the circus, but I became an amateur circus performer while I was still at school. It was my passion. First I worked as an acrobat and trick cyclist in a small outfit known as the "Circus on Stage". But at the same time I was preparing to go to technical college to train as an engineer. Then came the day when I had to fill in for a clown who couldn't come on tour...

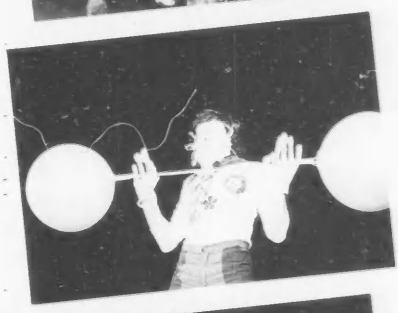
What happened?
I saw the eyes of the audience as they laughed, I heard their laughter and their applause. It was irresistible. It's like when you know a funny story and you're longing to tell it to somebody. You're already laughing about it and you enjoy it just as much as the person you tell it to. It's this need to share, to make people laugh, to make them react, to bring them some warmth and a positive feeling, which drives me on. So I decided to become a professional clown.

Is this encounter with the public always crucial for you?
Yes. Of course, audience reactions can vary from town to town, and from country to country. The age range of the spectators is different every night and that affects the nature of the show. We're used to it, that's how things are. With an audience that loves the circus, the experience is very fruitful; it's like two people communicating frankly and openly. In one way or another, every actor on stage, every person in real life, always wants some form of contact. Well, that's what I offer: knowing how to give, being receptive to others. And that's how I want to live. ■

◄ **Colour page left**

The Soviet juggler Serguei Ignatov works with as many as 11 rings, a world record
Photo © Sylvie Mercier, Paris

Photos Unesco/George Ducrel



In photo sequence, right, taken at a Paris performance during the Moscow Circus's tour of France in 1986-1987, clown Anatoli Martchevski burlesques the act of weightlifter Valentin Dikul, who had preceded him in the ring. Dikul is a bearded colossus who juggles weights of 50 to 500 kg as if they were feathers. After finding other uses for the talc which the weightlifter had rubbed on his hands to give him a better grip, Martchevski gravely tries to lift barbells whose weights are balloons. In this parody sketch, Martchevski returns to one of the clown's traditional sources of inspiration.

Schools for artistes

by Monica J. Renevey

Rapt spectators at the Grand Cirque, Palais des Sports, Paris, 1957

THE Swiss sociologist Jean Ziegler claims that the circus is "the last surviving trace of an ancient, existential and esoteric form of knowledge". There are only two ways of perpetuating this knowledge and the unique, ancestral art of the circus: transmitting it from generation to generation within the family, or teaching it in a circus school.

Great circus dynasties such as the Knie, the Gruss, the Togni, the Althoff and a few other families have practised the first method. But, as we shall see, a Gruss and a Fratellini also founded the first circus schools in France. Conversely, it is quite common in countries such as the USSR and Poland to find third- or even fourth-generation circus artistes who are learning their skills at the State circus school, but who also benefit incalculably from the experience of their fathers, of members of an older generation. In the past, too, a boy would sometimes be lured away by the glamour of the sawdust ring and "oompah" music and, leaving his family and his village, would be lucky enough to find a "master" who would agree to teach him all the tricks of the trade.

Let us pay a brief visit to some of the circus schools that exist today in different parts of the world. First stop will be the famous Moscow Circus School, followed by its counterparts in Poland, Hungary, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and Cuba. Next we will head for France, which boasts three big circus schools, and then look at a few isolated but interesting cases, such as the Big Apple Circus in New York, Canada's Cirque du Soleil, and the acrobatic troupes of China.

In 1919, Lenin signed a decree on the "nationalization of theatres and circuses" in the Soviet Union. At that time there were very few Russian artistes, and their Western counterparts, who were far more numerous, became the first instructors of the new generation of Soviet circus performers. The Moscow School was inaugurated in 1927 as the "School for Circus Arts", and its first pupils graduated in 1930. One of them, Mikhail Nikolaievich Rumiantsev (1901-1983), later became world famous as the clown Karandash (literally "pencil", in Russian). The Soviet Union is undeniably the hardest place in which to learn to be a clown, because of the very high standards required in the examinations. A Soviet clown must be not only a perfect mime but also a rope dancer, a walker on the slack wire, a good juggler and an excellent acrobat.

In addition to the famous Moscow School, the USSR has two more official circus schools organized along the same lines. One is at Kiev, in the Ukraine, and the other is at Tbilisi, in Georgia. About a hundred teachers (sixty of them full time) instruct 300 pupils. The age of admission ranges from fifteen to twenty, and the course lasts four years. Every year, three selective examinations (medical—including general bearing and presence, physical aptitudes and musical ability) weed out all but seventy-five pupils.

In the first year, eclectic forms of teaching and practical work enable the teachers to assess their pupils' general abilities and, above all, their individual gifts. Pupils are encouraged to go on only if they are capable of reaching a very high level. Specialization takes place in the second year, and the third year is spent refining and polishing. The fourth and final year belongs to the chosen few who are considered to be worthy representatives of the Soviet circus.

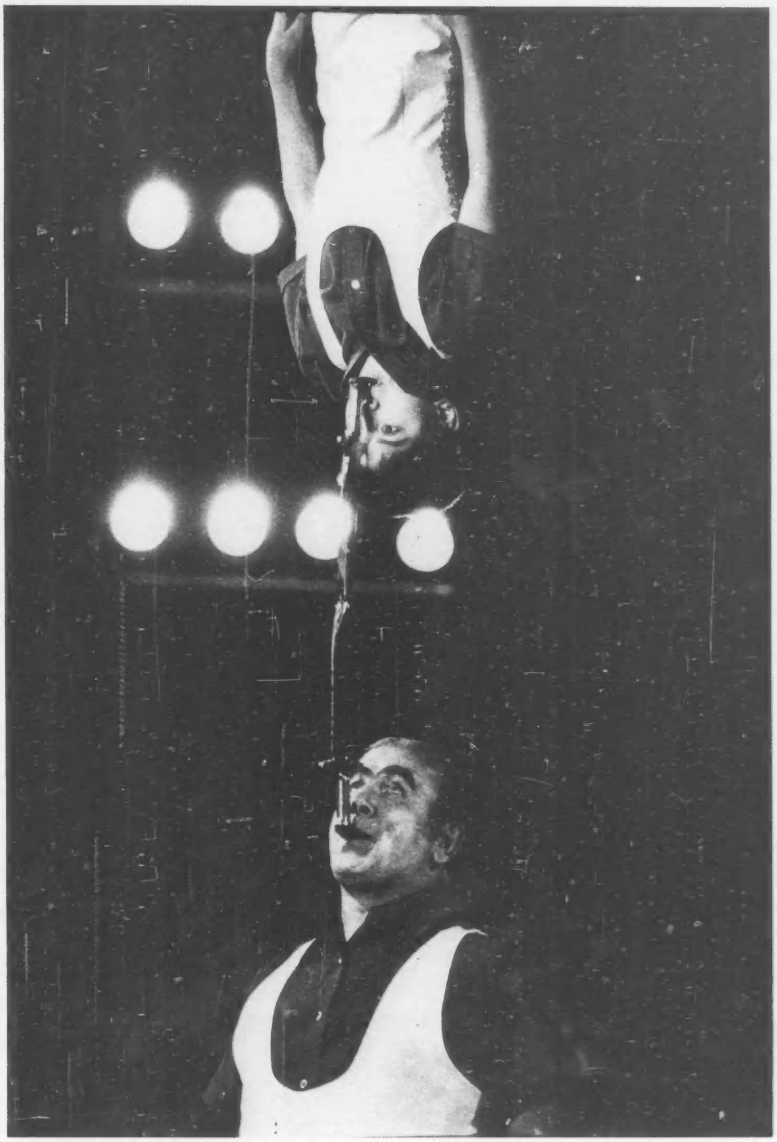


Photo © Roland Bourguet, Paris

Balanced on a knife edge. A spectacular feat based on the strength of the jaw, as performed in Paris by the Circo Americano, a big Italian circus.

Those who are not chosen will play "small parts", as long as they pass the two final examinations, one in their own discipline and another in philosophy, for in the USSR a circus artiste is something more than a muscular, spangled figure capable of landing accurately to within the nearest millimetre on his partner's feet, or of making animals perform without seeming to give them any orders. The circus artiste is always part of a vast and carefully planned programme inspired by a long-term philosophy of the performing arts.

In the last few years, all the circus professionals who meet annually at the Monte Carlo Festival have been saying that "the wind is blowing from the East". The new trend in the circus, which combines harmony of gesture, beauty of performance and strength of feeling, has sprung from Soviet circus philosophy.

The director of the Leningrad Circus, Valentin Kuznetsov, like other Soviet circus school authorities, feels that "technical skill alone is a thing of the past. The overriding aim is now to communicate an emotion to the audience. In the Soviet Union today, a circus performance is planned as if it were a piece of drama, with a prologue, action, and epilogue. The almost theatrical sequence of the acts is of paramount importance, but the progression must be sustained by a *heightening of emotion.* This is where the entrée clown, typical of the USSR, comes in. The whole programme hinges on him; he is the hub of all the action ..."

The art of clowning has also changed; the clown now tries to get people to smile rather than laugh. Considerable subtlety is required, and in addition to his physical prowess the artiste must be able to understand the psychology of different types of audience, know all about the joys and sorrows of everyday life and possess great emotional versatility.

Nearly all the other socialist countries of Eastern Europe have circus schools, but the standard achieved by their graduates is in most cases lower than that of their Soviet counterparts. The main reason for this is the lack of support for circus arts and artistes on the part of many local authorities.

In Poland, the winter quarters of circuses and of the school are in Julinek, 30 kilometres from Warsaw, on a former great estate in the beautiful forest of Kampinovski. Only pupils who have passed their secondary school leaving certificate and are under the age of twenty-one are allowed to enrol for the two-year courses held at the school, which was founded in 1967. In the first year, a wide range of disciplines are taught, including anatomy and biomechanics. Preparation for individual acts takes place in the second year, which also includes paid training periods with Polish circuses. In order to get the most out of Poland's artistic potential, some directors are trying to extend the courses and make them more intensive, and, above all, to lower the age of admission to sixteen.

Cuba and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea have each founded a circus school on the Soviet model. In Cuba, which has four circuses, there is a four-year course, and pupils often finish their training in Moscow, while the national circus and school founded in Pyongyang in 1952 provides four years of basic training after which the pupils begin to polish their acts. One typical Korean acrobatic number uses the seesaw (a piece of apparatus that can be seen in parks all over the country); recently Western audiences have had the opportunity to admire a young acrobat in a tight-fitting kimono turn backward somersaults after being launched in this way.

Back in Europe, the Budapest Circus School follows the Moscow pattern, except that its organization is patriarchal (many families today have been in the circus for four or even five generations). All the teachers are former artistes or gymnasts. Like its counterparts for drama and dance, the Hungarian Circus School accepts pupils at eleven years of age and offers an eight-year course. The first half of the course is spent studying basic disciplines and general culture, up to the level of the school leaving certificate. The second half provides professional training, with three years devoted primarily to acrobatics, followed by specialization. The School may modify an act to suit the aptitudes of a pupil or even to take account of market demand. It is open to Westerners and has already awarded diplomas to French and Swiss pupils.

The Gruss Circus School, founded in Paris in 1972 by Alexis Gruss Junior and the

Photo N. Akimov © APN, Paris

In the Soviet Union, circus artistes are as popular as film stars and sporting heroes, and there is strong competition for admission to circus schools. Above, a young Muscovite tries his hand at clowning, made up as Oleg Popov, the internationally known Soviet clown.

One time-honoured way of becoming a circus performer is to belong to one of the great circus dynasties. Below, Achille Zavatta, a famous auguste, leaves the ring with his son Franck.

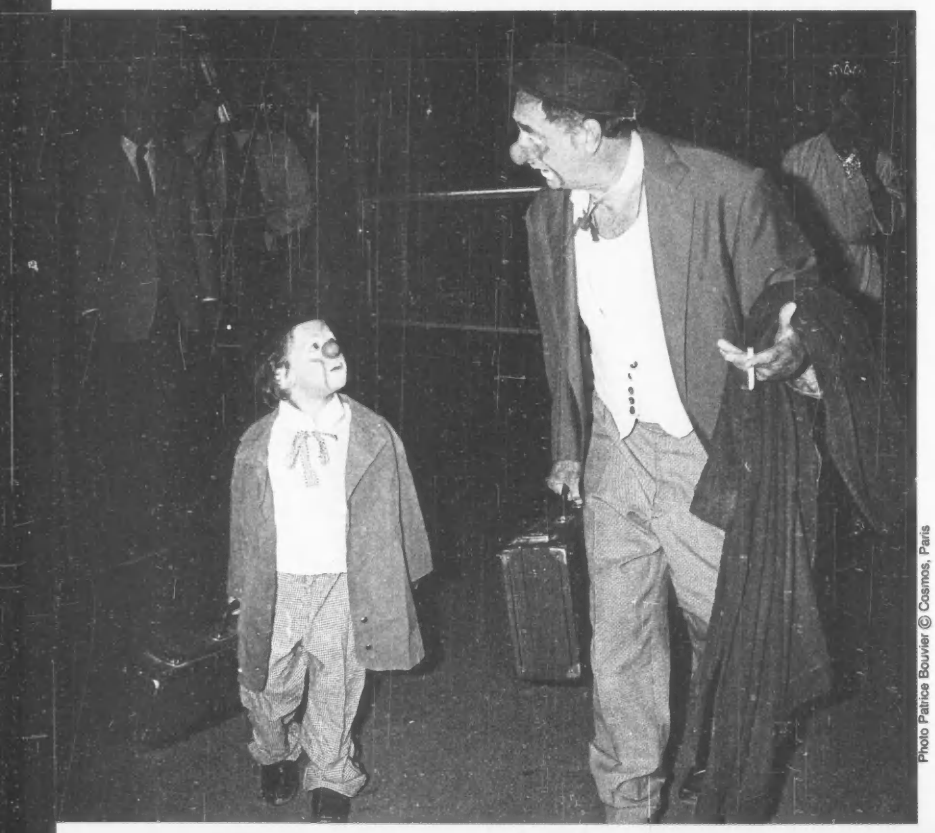


Photo Patrice Bouvier © Cosmos, Paris

actress Silvia Monfort, was also "patriarchal". It was housed in a former theatre whose high-ceilinged rooms were particularly suitable for practising trapeze acts. The pupils studied basic subjects for one year and then prepared their act for two years before performing in their own old-style Circus. With their small tent pitched in the heart of Paris and the school right next to it, the Gruss family were pioneers in revolutionizing circus arts in the West.

Also in Paris, Annie Fratellini and Pierre Etaix founded the National Circus School, open to all young people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five (see article page 27). There are even beginners' classes for six-year-olds. Basic disciplines are taught in the first year, and then technical problems (erecting and dismantling apparatus, lighting) are tackled, and training periods are arranged in a travelling circus. After three years, the pupils can think of preparing a professional number.

Since 1986, France has also possessed the first professional circus school in the West organized on Eastern European lines, the High School (of the National Centre) of Circus Arts, at Châlons-sur-Marne. Pupils from France and other countries are recruited from the age of sixteen on by competitive examination. The course consists of two two-year stages. The first is designed to encourage the expression of individual and group potential and to guide the pupils towards a suitable line of specialization. Specialized work begins in the third year, and in the fourth year acts are worked out and polished. A circus performer's diploma is awarded at the end of the course. The basic disciplines taught for three years include acrobatics, dance and music; the circus techniques include trapeze-work and trick riding; and the general subjects taught range from anatomy and physiology to show business management and labour legislation. There were 370 entrants for the first examination: twenty-five passed, and nineteen of these continued into their second year. The school is directed by Guy Caron, a Canadian who is a former pupil of the Budapest School.

Each of North America's few circus schools flourishes in the shadow of a circus. In 1983 Guy Caron set up a private circus school in Canada, which works closely with the Cirque du Soleil, of which he is also artistic director. Here, too, in keeping with modern trends, great importance is attached to choreography. In the United States, the giant Ringling Circus has a "Clown College" where the art of comedy is taught. American clowns, with their custard pies and monstrous tooth extractions, are in a class apart.

New York's Big Apple Circus and its school, the New York School for Circus Arts, Inc., are ten years old. The School, run by Frenchman Dominique Jando, offers a course for children between the ages of nine and thirteen, organized jointly with the Manhattan Harbor School, which provides two hours a day of circus training and options for more advanced instruction. When the Big Apple Circus acquires its new building, it plans to organize courses for thirteen- to sixteen-year-olds and to create a professional training school.

In China, there are no Big Tops. Circuses are usually stationary and have troupes of acrobats which are the equivalent of circus schools. Foremost among these is the Acrobatic Troupe of China, which was formed in 1950 as the Zhonghua Troupe, and has inspired a number of other groups including the Troupes of Shanghai, Chongqing, Shenyang, Wuhan and the Troupe of the Guangzhou Soldiers.

China today has some 130 professional State troupes, with over 11,000 artistes. Conjuring and voice imitations are two highly popular specialities. Anyone who works in show business can join the Association of Chinese Acrobats, which was founded in 1981. Its woman president is a former acrobat, Xia Juhua, who is also a Deputy to the People's Congress. It is not surprising that China should produce circus acts of high calibre, since quality is connected with the respect accorded to artistry, and circus artistes in China and the Soviet Union enjoy high social status. ■

MONICA J. RENEVEY, *of Switzerland, is an animal trainer turned reporter, writer and publicist. She is the chief author and editor of a French encyclopedia on the circus, entitled* Le grand livre du cirque *(Bibliothèque des Arts, Geneva, 1977). Among her many publications and articles on the circus are* Il circo e il suo mondo *(Laterza, Rome, 1985) and* J'aime le cirque *(Walt Disney Productions, Paris, 1986).*

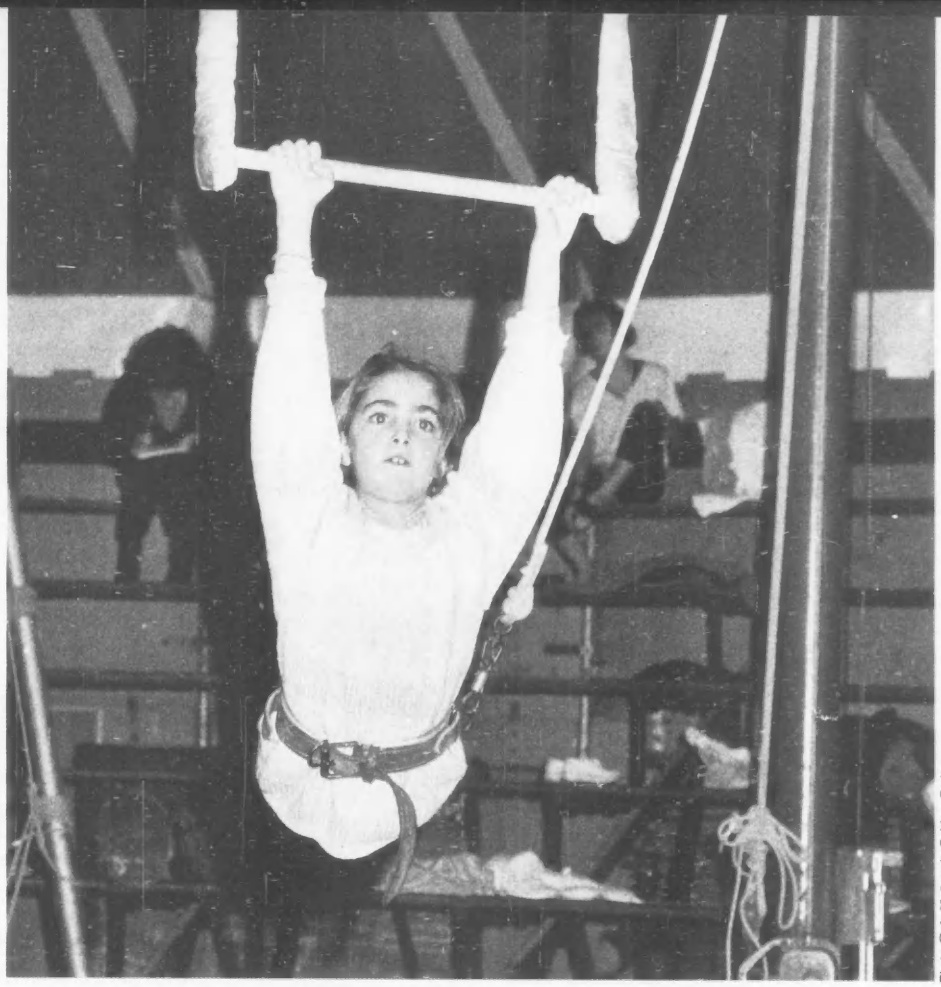


Photo © A. Muñoz de Pablos, Paris

The freedom of the ring

by Annie Fratellini

"If an art is to survive, it needs a school." Above, a young trapeze artiste trains at the National Circus School founded in Paris by Annie Fratellini and Pierre Etaix.

FRATELLINI—it's our real name—means "little brothers" in Italian. Gustave, born in 1842 in Carrara, was the first member of the family to join the circus, just as one might join a religion. He had four sons: Louis (1868-1909), Paul (1877-1940), François (1879-1951) and Albert (1886-1961). When the eldest died, the remaining three formed a trio that became famous—"the Fratellini Brothers".

My father Victor, son of Paul, was an acrobat. He taught me acrobatics, the concertina and the saxophone. He gave me a new musical instrument—an accordion, a vibraphone, a violin, a piano—for each birthday. I learned to play them all. I made my first appearance in the ring at the Cirque Medrano in Paris, at the age of twelve. I had to balance on a rolling blue globe, trundling it forwards while I played the saxophone.

But by the time I was twenty, I wanted to forget about the circus. It was a family—my family—that I rejected wholesale. I left the circus and went into jazz, singing, music hall, drama and films. Why? Mainly because it had not lived up to my expectations. The circus of my childhood wasn't the circus as my parents had known it.

The memories that I cherished were those of Grandfather Paul—the auguste with the top hat and the monocle. But I had to learn all the circus disciplines without sharing in its magic and mystery. It was wartime. The circuses were silent. I had to break free, and for fifteen years I turned my back on the circus.

What gave me the idea of setting up a circus school? Originally it must have been Paul, my grandfather, who gave me this desire to widen my horizons. He had a remarkable collection of books, and was interested in the theatre, music, painting—all the arts. With him I listened to Beethoven, Wagner, Puccini and Verdi. He talked to me about life at the Cirque Medrano, where the three Fratellini brothers worked from 1909 to 1925. In 1920 they gave the first performance of Jean Cocteau's sketch *Le bœuf sur le toit*, with music by Darius Milhaud. Musicians such as Milhaud, Jean Wiener, Henri Sauguet, Georges Auric and Erik Satie; writers—Cocteau, Raymond Radiguet, and Colette; painters, such as Georges Rouault, Fernand Léger, Pablo Picasso and many more—all used to come to the Cirque Med-

Photos © Berthe Judet, Paris

"Make-up isn't a disguise; it helps to bring out your personality." Above, Annie Fratellini, one of the few female clowns, prepares for her renowned auguste act.

rano, and would gather in the Fratellinis' dressing-room after the show.

My life took a new direction in 1968 when I met Pierre Etaix, a terrific fan of clowns and of the Fratellinis. He persuaded me to return to the ring. Fernand Léger used to say, "A ring means freedom: it has neither beginning nor end". Pierre Etaix was the white-faced clown. I was the auguste. Three years later, we went on our first tour with the Pinder Circus.

I abandoned everything in order to return to my origins. My daughter Valérie (born in 1960, the child of a previous marriage to the film-maker Pierre Granier-Deferre), who had kept away from the circus, decided to become a trapeze artiste. Where could she train? There were no more circuses in Paris. Medrano was dead, and the Cirque d'Hiver was being used for other types of show.

If an art is to survive, it needs a school. Where there were schools, the circus was alive and well. This was an observable fact. Encouraged by the then Minister of Culture, Jacques Duhamel, we first of all founded the National Circus School Association in 1971. Then, in 1974, we were able to establish the school in a Paris youth centre.

It was an instant success. I had expected about twenty young people: 600 turned up. We had to organize classes. I was determined that the teachers should be artistes themselves, the best in their field, real professionals who also wanted to teach. I wanted the school to be wide open and generous in its approach, without any initial weeding-out of applicants. Selection would occur naturally. My aim was to instil in all the young beginners the same high standards and the same respect for work well done.

In 1977, we pitched our circus tent on a piece of land adjoining the La Villette park in Paris. Circus arts have to be learned in a clearly defined space, a particular place. Since we received very little in the way of subsidies, we had to fight to prove that the craft of the circus was necessary. In that year our school became the first technical education establishment to award a Professional Circus Diploma (circus tent equipment assembler), and the circus became officially part of French education in 1985.

The school provides two types of teaching: artistic and technical. On the technical side, pupils learn how a tent canvas is put together, how king poles, quarter-poles and all the rest of the equipment are manufactured. Next they learn to read a tent plan, lay out a tent and build it up. They also study joinery, metal work, electricity and sound systems. After three years they take an examination.

In the artistic disciplines, dancing and acrobatics are compulsory. After three months, pupils choose from among the following options: fixed trapeze, flying trapeze, tightwire, juggling, basic music, equestrian voltige, clowning and trampoline. Having passed through the school, the pupils can then take their first steps in public, learn to set up an act, choose a musical accompaniment and a costume, regulate their lighting and participate in the preparation of the show.

It was for these pupils that we created the Fratellini Circus, which is attached to the school. An exhibition on the clowns in my family travels with it on tour. Thus, at the end of the road, I offer my pupils my memories, linking the past with the future. If an art is to continue, its roots must be well planted. At the end of this training the pupils can embark on the artiste's life equipped with all the qualities of a true professional, or they can choose something else.

The intake is international: we have pupils from other countries besides France.

Annie Fratellini's "auguste shoes", which once belonged to her grandfather, Paul (1877-1940), one of the famous trio of "Fratellini Brothers" who made their name at the Cirque Medrano in Paris.

Photo © Berthe Judet, Paris

A circus whose artistes are all from the same country is not a real circus; diversity is essential, in nationality as well as in performance. And during the school holidays we go on tour with the pupils. Since 1975 our Big Top has visited 200 towns, we have toured in England, Belgium, Italy and the United States, and have welcomed 1.5 million spectators.

At present, 360 young people are attending the school; 200 children from the age of eight upwards come to learn on Wednesdays and Saturdays. It takes at least three years at the Circus School to learn acrobatics, which is the foundation for all other disciplines. Learning on the job is indispensable, and those who stay are those who have what it takes to practise the art of the circus at a high level. Out of 300 pupils between the ages of eight and twenty, 5 per cent succeed.

Thus we have trained a new generation of artistes who can be seen in a number of establishments. Circuses with schools, such as the Big Apple Circus in the United States and the Cirque du Soleil in Canada, have grown up in the light of our experience.

For twelve years, our circus has been battling against difficulties. For the circus is nothing if not fragile. To those who do not like it, the effort that it requires may seem futile. We "build up"—put up the circus tent—we work, and we go on our way. And we say to ourselves, "So much labour for so little reward". But our reward is the pleasure we give to the audience. We relive the legend of the "travellers", the strolling players of the olden days: we set our own scene in which to present a world of dreams and magic. The circus entails, above all, hard work, and a team; team-work. It is a craft, and must be exercised with sensitivity. I am gratified that so many young people are attracted to it.

The circus is regarded by most people in show business, whether in the theatre, dance or the cinema, as a school second to none. It is, after all, at the heart of all forms of show business, and this explains its influence and its continued existence. I wanted a school, a ring: "A circus for the future." ■

ANNIE FRATELLINI, *of France, is a member of a famous circus family. From early training as an acrobat she has gone on to be a singer, musician, and actress. She has appeared in films by Louis Malle, René Clair, Pierre Granier-Deferre, Federico Fellini and Pierre Etaix. Since 1974 she has run the National Circus School in Paris, which she founded with Pierre Etaix.*

The circus on celluloid

2 Photo © *Cahiers du cinéma*, Paris

3 Photo © *Cahiers du cinéma*, Paris

4 Photo © Edimedia, Paris

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Photo © *Cahiers du cinéma*, Paris

The circus has been a fertile source of inspiration for the cinema, from the early films of Louis Lumière and Georges Méliès, which featured artistes such as Little Tich (Harry Ralph, 1868-1928) a forerunner of the famous figure of the tramp invented by Charlie Chaplin, to the animated cartoon films of Walt Disney, notably *Dumbo* (1941), and spectacular productions like Cecil B. deMille's *The Greatest Show on Earth* (1952). From the 1920s on, circus themes began to attract some of the world's leading film-makers. (1) A scene from *The Circus* (1928) by Charlie Chaplin. (2) The Marx Brothers' comedy *At the Circus* (1939). (3) *Der Himmel über Berlin* (1987; *Wings of Desire*) by Wim Wenders.(4) *Cycklarnas Aftom* (1953; *Sawdust and Tinsel*) by Ingmar Bergman.

'As American as apple pie'

The art of the circus spectacular

by A.H. Saxon

LIKE its European ancestor, the circus in the United States began with exhibitions of trick horsemanship, to which clowns, acrobats and tightrope performers were quickly added. Its founder was the British equestrian John Bill Ricketts, who had previously performed in English circuses and who, in the 1790s, established permanent circus buildings of his own in Philadelphia and New York City. Ricketts and his small troupe also toured cities in the USA and Canada, often erecting temporary wooden arenas along their route.

Meanwhile, in a parallel development, other showmen had begun taking around the country small collections of exotic animals brought to these shores by enterprising ships' captains. There were no public zoos in the United States at this time. Consequently, it was through such exhibitions that most Americans had their first view of lions, camels, elephants and other non-native animals. The menagerie owners, whose "caravans" quickly grew to impressive sizes, established permanent buildings in such cities as New York, where they exhibited their animals during the winter months. When the weather was warm, they continued to tour, and they soon hit upon the idea of exhibiting under canvas tents, thereby eliminating the need to erect boarded enclosures or lease existing buildings wherever they went. Beginning in the 1820s, this innovation was adopted by American circuses.

'Big Tops' that could seat 10,000

With these portable tents that could easily be erected or taken down in a few hours, they were free to roam wherever they liked, even to the smallest towns in the hinterlands, where they often gave single performances, then moved on in time to exhibit in the next town on the following day. From the introduction of the tent dates the true beginning of the American touring circus, which later in the nineteenth century expanded into "tented cities" of astounding dimensions—consisting of "big tops" capable of seating 10,000 or more spectators; separate tents for menageries, sideshows and other attractions; dressing tents and dining-room or "cook tents" for artistes and employees; not to mention additional tents for stabling the hundreds of draft horses that pulled the circus wagons, for blacksmiths and veterinary surgeons, and for various other purposes.

By the mid-nineteenth century, too, a number of circuses had linked up with menageries, whose animals were no longer simply exhibited in cages, but were now featured in the increasingly elaborate street parade that advertised the arrival of the circus in a town, in processions and races (between camels, elephants, and even ostriches ridden by monkeys) inside the circus tent itself, and in separate numbers of their own. Among these last was the sensational act by the celebrated American lion trainer Isaac Van Amburgh, who first entered a cage with his "big cats" in the 1830s and shortly thereafter, as the first American circus performer to gain an international reputation, appeared with them in various European cities.

There is no such thing as "pure" circus, and since the early days of Philip Astley in London and Antonio Franconi in Paris, the circus has traditionally been a mixture of diverse entertainments: of tumbling and rope walking which date from Antiquity, of trick horsemanship performed in open fields by eighteenth-century riding masters, of clowns whose roots are traceable at least to the Commedia dell'Arte, of pantomimes and even theatrical spectacles, in which animals often took part, performed on huge scenic stages in permanent circus buildings and theatres.

'The Greatest Show on Earth'

In the United States, another accretion occurred in the late nineteenth century, drawn from the hippodromes of Henri Narcisse Franconi and Phineas T. Barnum in New York City (built in 1853 and 1874, respectively). These establishments were huge arenas—sometimes open to the air, sometimes roofed with canvas or glass—that had been popular for some years in Europe and were a conscious attempt to recreate the ancient Roman "circus" and its "games". This was not the circus as we know it today, but rather the great oval course over which races, *à la Ben Hur,* were run. In the United States, such arenas featured races between Roman chariots, between male and female jockeys on individual horses, representations of stag hunts with real stags and full packs of hounds in pursuit, besides steeplechases, foot races and related attractions. The oval hippodrome track and the kinds of entertainment peculiar to it were also adopted by the American circus—but not before another important development had taken place.

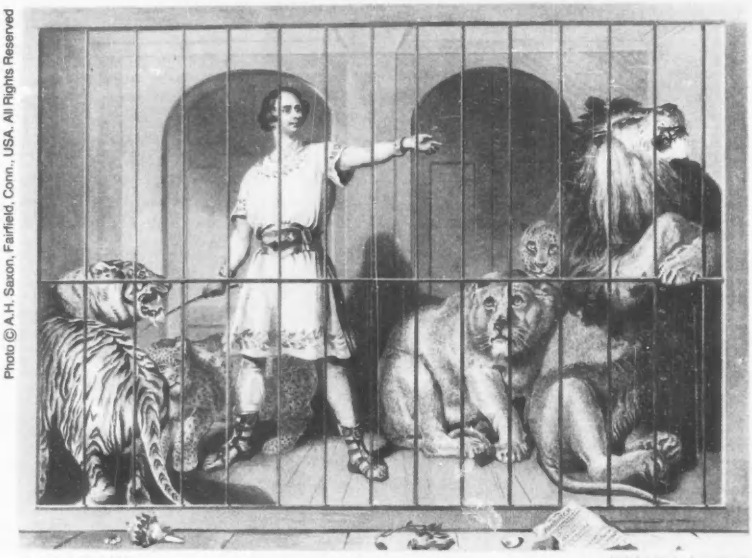
As in Europe, American circuses were originally one-ring affairs, an arrangement that remained the norm until the 1870s. At the beginning of that decade the great showman P.T. Barnum, then in his sixties, entered the field and, within a few brief years, created what he proudly termed "The Greatest Show on Earth". The size of his main tent or Big Top was so large that many spectators had difficulty seeing, stood up in their seats and crowded to the ringside, and consequently interfered with the view of others. At the beginning of his second season in 1872, therefore, Barnum and his partner William C. Coup decided to add a second ring, in which acts were performed simultaneously with those in the first—in effect making their enterprise into a "double circus". At the same time they added to their establishment an oval hippodrome track, encompassing the two rings and running around the arena immediately in front of the spectators' seats; and races, spectacular processions and triumphal drives in a carriage by the famous showman himself became standard features on this vast expanse. The arrangement proved so popular that nearly every circus in the country soon added a second ring.

The three-ring circus

To go one better than these competitors and further increase the size of their tent, in 1881 Barnum and his new partner James A. Bailey added a third ring, thereby completing the evolution of what is perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of the American circus: the "three-ring" format. In fact, even this term gives but a faint idea of the multiplicity of entertainment such a show presents, since besides the three rings and hippodrome track, Barnum added two large platforms or "stages" between the rings for acts requiring a firm surface, such as trick cycling or roller-skating, while above the arena high-wire artistes and as many as three trapeze troupes might perform at the same time! When Barnum took his huge show to London during the winter of 1889-1890, British spectators, still accustomed to the traditional one-ring circus, hardly knew what to make of it. It was bewildering, overwhelming, apt to give spectators "fits of indigestion", critics wrote. Yet nearly all agreed it was a magnificent spectacle.

Since the days of Barnum, at least, "spectacle" has remained another distinctive feature of American circuses. On the great hippodrome track itself, elaborate processions, featuring horses, elephants and all

◀Roll up! Roll up! Before the show, a young performer encourages the public to come and see the "crocodile-woman". Lagny (France), 1959.



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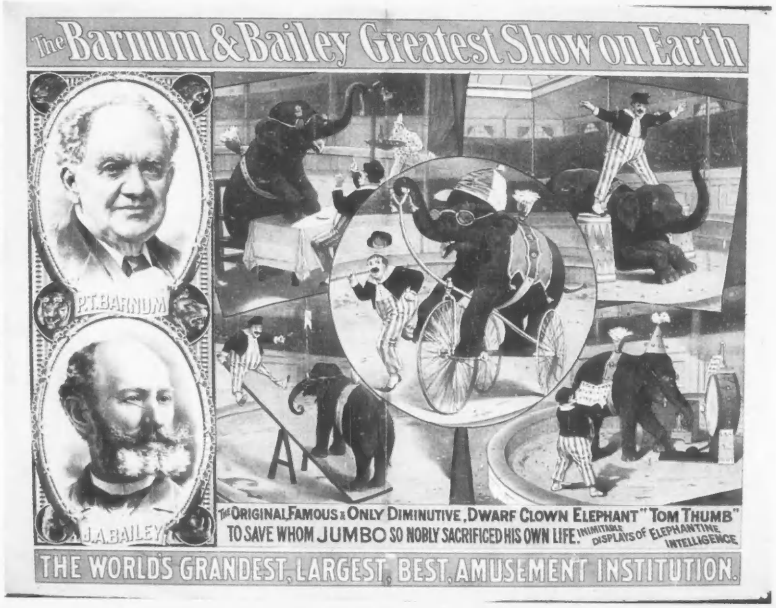
Sir Edwin Landseer painted the portrait, above, of the American lion tamer Isaac A. Van Amburgh (1801-1865) with his big cats while they were performing in the United Kingdom in the late 1830s. Note the comparatively small, rectangular cage. The circular "big cage" used by circuses today only began to appear at the end of the 19th century.

An early poster for the Ringling Brothers ▶ Circus, one of the great itinerant American circuses of the early 20th century. The circus, under the name of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, is still performing today.

Below, Barnum & Bailey Circus poster (1887) for an act by a dwarf elephant, "Tom Thumb", named after one of Barnum & Bailey's most famous attractions, the midget "General Tom Thumb" (real name Charles Sherwood Stratton). Phineas T. Barnum (1810-1891) and his partner James A. Bailey (1847-1906) are depicted at left.

Photo © R.-L. Dauven, Paris



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Bridgeport Public Library, Historical Collections

the human artistes, are given to this day; while traditionally, at another point in the programme, all of these forces, gorgeously costumed, participate in a mammoth pantomime or "spec", as it is termed, whose theme may be based on some nursery tale or historic event, and whose action occupies all three rings in addition to the track.

In Barnum's day there was sometimes even a raised stage—over 100 metres wide—at one side of the arena, on which grandiose pantomimes like *Nero, or The Destruction of Rome* were performed. This particular production, which was given in 1889 and 1890, employed a cast of over 1,000 actors and dancers, a full orchestra and choir of 100 voices, and nearly all the animals belonging to the establishment, besides scenery depicting the interior of

Photo © Roland Smulders, Utrecht

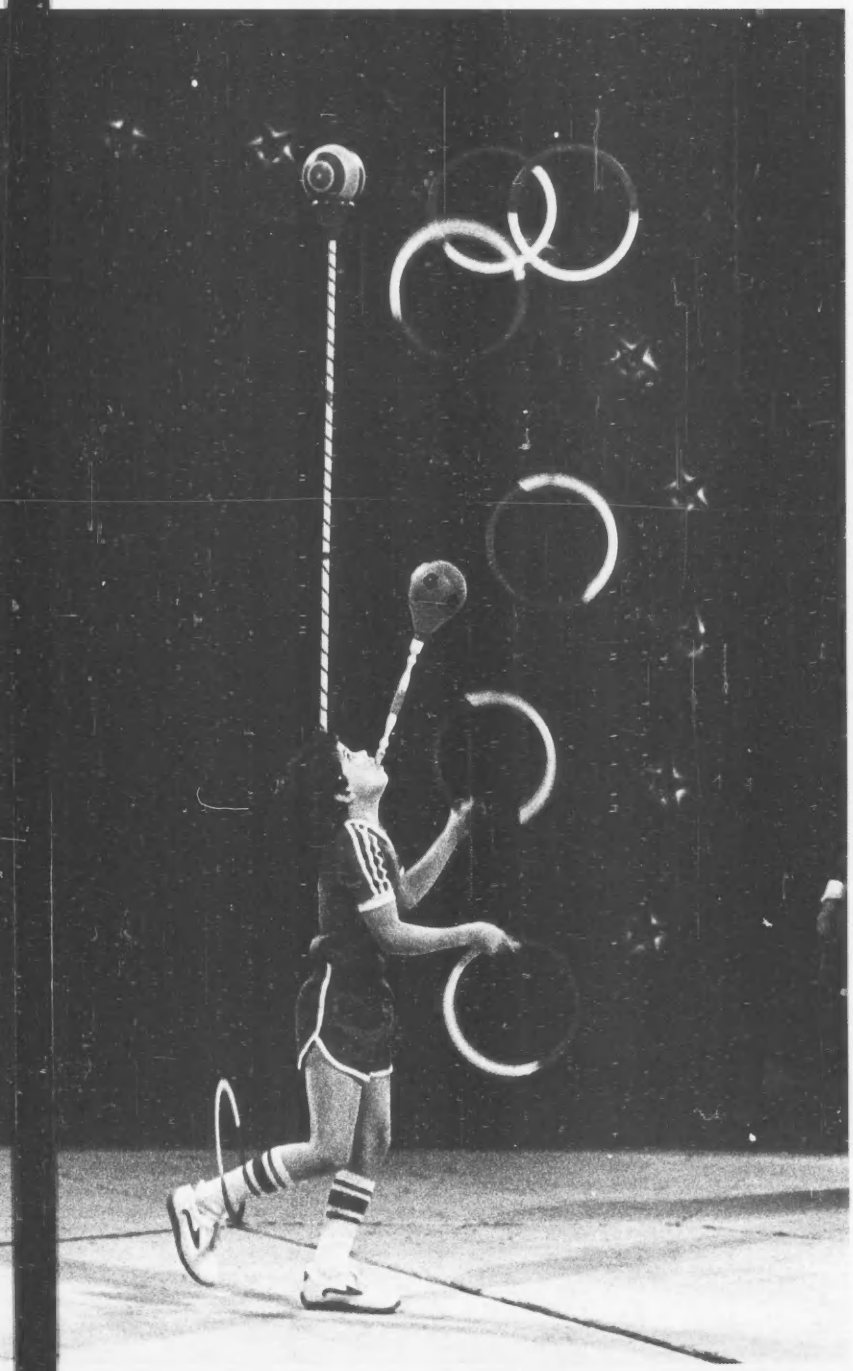
Nero's palace, the Circus Maximus, and Rome itself, which spectacularly "burned" at the end, of course, amidst a glorious apotheosis celebrating the DAWN OF CHRISTIANITY!

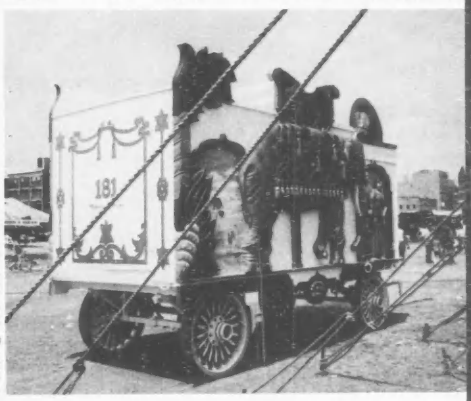
Bigness—sheer size for the sake of size—has traditionally been another goal of American circuses, the expressions "one-horse show" and "one-elephant circus" generally being terms of derision. In Barnum's day again, which is sometimes referred to as the "golden age" of the American circus, as many as forty trained elephants might participate in the programme, while the menagerie tent itself often rivalled or actually outshone the finest zoos in the country. "Freaks"—human prodigies like the celebrated midget Tom Thumb (discovered by Barnum) and Chang and Eng, the famous Siamese Twins—abounded in the sideshow or "museum" department, which also displayed a profusion of automata, illusions and curious inventions.

Three special trains for a single show

To Americans, especially those living in rural areas, the day the circus came to town was a major event. For here, crammed into the space of a few brief hours, was entertainment enough to last a year, beginning with a spectacular street parade that featured blaring bands and beautifully carved "tableau" wagons; gorgeously costumed riders atop richly caparisoned mounts; up to forty horses pulling a single, colossal band wagon; elephants ambling along with picturesque howdahs on their backs; while other animals—lions and tigers, monkeys, giraffes, even serpents behind plate-glass windows—were drawn along in their own special wagons; and at the very end (in case of explosion!) another American invention, the steam organ or calliope, whose raucous, ear-splitting notes could be heard kilometres away.

To transport these immense shows to all the cities throughout the United States and Canada, Barnum and his contemporaries soon abandoned horse-drawn wagons, fitted out their own special railway trains, and devised new methods for quickly loading and unloading them. Indeed, so marvellously efficient did this operation become that it was not unusual for a circus like Barnum's to unload early in the morning,





Photos © D. Jando, New York

Above, a restored "Elephant Wagon" belonging to the Al G. Barnes Circus parked on a lot at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA. Top, a once-familiar scene reconstituted in 1985: the circus train arrives in an American town.

Balancing and juggling act performed by the young American artiste Anthony Gatto

set up its tents and give its street parade and as many as three complete performances, reload in late evening and travel overnight hundreds of kilometres to another town, to begin all over again the following day.

The circus artistes and labourers (whose one day off was Sunday) slept aboard the trains, and the logistics and careful advance planning required by such an unrelenting schedule may easily be imagined. No less than three separate trains were needed to carry all the employees, animals, tents and paraphernalia belonging to Barnum's establishment. Garishly decorated "advertising cars", attached to regular trains and carrying press agents, billposters and so on, preceded the show by several weeks in order to publicize its coming. Other special agents also travelled in advance to arrange for the rental of the circus lot, the delivery of food and fodder for the circus employees and animals, and anything else that might be required. When Barnum's partner and successor James A. Bailey toured the United Kingdom and continental Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, again using special trains modified to the specifications of the circus, military officers from all the countries through which the show passed were sent to observe these precise operations—and were later said to have put what they learned to good use during the First World War.

A college for clowns

In the present century the American circus, while retaining many of these traditions, has continued to be influenced by contemporary developments. With the one notable exception of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey—the lineal descendant of Barnum's show—nearly all circuses now move by motor transport. The circus parade has been entirely abandoned, although many of its handsome chariots and ornately carved wagons have been lovingly restored and may still be admired at the Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wisconsin. The Big Top and three-ring format continue to flourish; but here again the Ringling show, the largest in the country, proves to be an exception. At the end of its 1956 season this renowned circus gave up playing under canvas and ever since has performed in the modern, enclosed sports arenas that are now found in virtually every North American city. Besides saving considerably on expenses, this arrangement permits the circus to exhibit for up to eleven months each year (in fact there are two Ringling shows, the "Red" and the "Blue" units), while spectators are more comfortably accommodated than they formerly were.

Of the dozens of other circuses that criss-cross North America each season, undoubtedly the most interesting and elegant is the Big Apple Circus, a show that exhibits in a single ring, employs a tent that seats only around 1,600 people, and deliberately attempts to emulate "European" traditions. With its headquarters in New York City, supported by subventions from both the municipal and State governments, this non-profit organization also runs a school for training future circus artistes. For the past few years, at its winter quarters in Florida, the Ringling show has also run a special "college" for clowns.

Unlike the situation found in several European countries, circuses in the United States—the reputable circuses that give their patrons a fair return for their money, that is—are generally in sound financial condition. For despite the advent of the movies, television, and a host of competing entertainments in the twentieth century, the circus, to use a popular expression, remains "as American as apple pie". ■

A.H. SAXON, *of the United States, is the author of over a hundred books, articles and reviews on the theatre, circus and popular entertainment. Among his publications, which have been translated into several languages, is* The Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow and the Romantic Age of the English Circus. *He is currently working on* P.T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man, *a biography of the famous showman.*

The rubber man

by Alfred Mikhaïl

THE Egyptian acrobat and contortionist Sabir Hamid Rammah is one of the stars of his country's National Circus. His virtuosity has earned him an international reputation. He is known as the "rubber man" because his movements are so graceful, supple and precise that his body seems boneless.

He does not belong to one of the old circus families, some of which were already travelling from town to town and village to village in the Arab countries before the seventeenth century. Accompanied by their menageries, they put on shows for *mawalid* festivals (anniversaries of the birth of the Prophet or of a Muslim holy man).

Rammah comes from a bedouin family which settled at Giza. Most of the family were tailors. From early childhood he was noted for his agility and dexterity. At the age of thirteen, he left his family to work as an acrobat in Alexandria, a cosmopolitan city which welcomed visiting foreign performers. A meeting with one of them, a German acrobat, led Rammah to polish his own act. Then, in 1950, he accompanied a trio of German acrobatic dancers when they went home.

On returning to Egypt two years later, Rammah had developed a new style in which he filled out his act with clowning. He worked in casinos and in schools which organized festivals and other spectacles, as well as in various private circuses.

In 1964 the Egyptian National Circus gave its first performances, which were highly popular. "A competitive spirit drove us all to excel," Rammah explains, "and we did our utmost to surpass ourselves. In our troupe we had first-rate performers such as the trapeze artiste Dakhli Amin. He would leap from the flying trapeze with a sack over his head, perform three backward somersaults and catch his partner's hands in mid-air. Other notable acts were that of the juggler, Farouk Rachid, and the Ben Abbas tightrope walkers."

Photo © All Rights Reserved

The Egyptian contortionist Sabir Hamid Rammah

Thanks to a policy of exchange visits with circuses in other countries, Rammah has worked with a number of circuses. In 1974 he won a international acrobatics competition in Tokyo.

Today Rammah works with the Egyptian National Circus in one of their permanent Big Tops, at Giza, on the banks of the Nile. Among the show's many attractions apart from acrobatics, are trained animals (as many as fourteen big cats at a time), trapeze artists and jugglers.

Rammah's passion for his art is so strong that he would like to die in the ring in the middle of his act. Thus he would have given his entire life to the circus, to his very last breath. ■

ALFRED MIKHAIL, *of Egypt, heads the documentary films section of the Egyptian television service. His own work for television includes films on the Suez Canal (1975), shadow plays (1983), and Verdi's opera* Aida *(1987).*

Photo © J.-L. Charmet, Paris

A topsy turvy world

by Manuel Pereira

"Might not the word 'circus' come from Circe, the sorceress in Homer's *Odyssey*?" Above, "Circe changing Odysseus' comrades into swine", by the Amsterdam-born engraver and print-dealer Jaspar de Isaac (died Paris, 1654).

WHAT is the etymological origin of the word *circus?* Common sense suggests that it comes from "circular", an allusion to the traditional shape of the circus ring from the Roman Coliseum to the Big Top of today. I would suggest another explanation. Might not the word *circus* come from Circe, the sorceress in Homer's *Odyssey* who changed Odysseus' comrades into swine? The Latin word *circenses,* describing the circus games, makes this hypothesis even more tempting, for what were the sorceress's tricks but circus acts before their time?

More prosaically, Pliny tells us that when the Romans first caught a giraffe in Africa they thought it was a cross between a camel and a leopard because it had a spotted coat. They supposed it to be an animal capable of fighting the gladiators in the arena, and there the harmless creature was killed, amid applause.

The stories of Circe and of the giraffe have one point in common—zoological confusion. Men are turned into pigs, giraffes are thought to be wild beasts. In both cases the natural order of things is inversed to produce an exciting spectacle. This desire to turn things upside down is the essence of the circus. What is an acrobat but a man who imitates a bird? What is a clown but an unreal being whose absurdity can make us laugh or cry? The behaviour of a tamed lion is as human as that of the gladiators in Vespasian's day was bestial. The bearded lady, the spider woman, the

Photo © Kupferstichkabinett, Basel, Switzerland

Fools and jesters were often depicted by 15th- and 16th-century European artists. Above, detail of a jester and his bauble drawn by the German artist Hans Holbein the Younger in the margin of a 1515 copy of *In Praise of Folly*, by the Dutch Humanist Erasmus.

frog man, Siamese twins, the sword-swallower—all the biological freaks, whether real or fake, that occur in the history of the circus can be traced back to Homer's Circe and Pliny's giraffe.

The circus is the world back to front. Whatever is unusual, eccentric or disturbing, whatever is, so to speak, a challenge to us, has always found an ideal refuge there. Moreover, this is not a purely European phenomenon; circuses are found all over the world. The museum of freaks that the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés discovered in Tenochtitlán was Moctezuma's private circus; and Marco Polo tells us with amazement how in another part of the world the Great Khan had a huge lion trained to kneel at the foot of the throne when there was a festival at the palace.

In every court, in every land, from China to Spain and from the time of the Mongol emperor Kubla Khan to that of the Spanish king Alfonso X (The Wise), there have always been astrologers and necromancers, clowns and acrobats, performing animals, jugglers and minstrels. Every court has been a kind of circus; one need only think of the extraordinary garments people wore at masked balls, the attire of the lansquenets (German mercenaries) or the Burgundians with their huge puff sleeves and cockscomb hats. The historians Johan Huizinga and Jules Michelet both give detailed descriptions of fashionable gatherings where the guests could watch puppets fly through the air and devices that made a sound like rolling thunder, dwarfs riding bears and huge Moors riding elephants, the statue of a woman with wine flowing from her breasts and that of a boy urinating rose-water, and a pie containing twenty-eight musicians. Leonardo da Vinci constructed a mechanical lion to amuse the guests at a banquet at the château of Clos-Lucé, where he was lodged by François I.

Tragedy and comedy are often mingled in the circus. The death of Aeschylus, for instance, is a circus turn in itself. An eagle caught a tortoise and flew up into the sky, then dropped it to break its shell, whereupon it fell on the sleeping poet's head. A comic accident, even though it cost the life of the great Greek tragedian. The tortoise transformed into a projectile might have been one of Circe's tricks, but it is also like an Eleatic aphorism or a Chaplinesque gag.

The blood-stained bullring is the only survival of the Roman circus, for bullfighting is basically a circus game which goes back to the mythical Minotaur of Crete. The bullfighter is to the gladiator what the bull is to the lion. That is why there are so many bulls, tumblers and harlequins in Picasso's paintings; they are all part of the same obsession. And the bullfighter's cos-

"Bullfighting is basically a circus game which goes back to the mythical Minotaur of Crete ... That is why there are so many bulls, tumblers and harlequins in Picasso's paintings; they are all part of the same obsession." Below, *The Picador*, a wash drawing by Picasso.

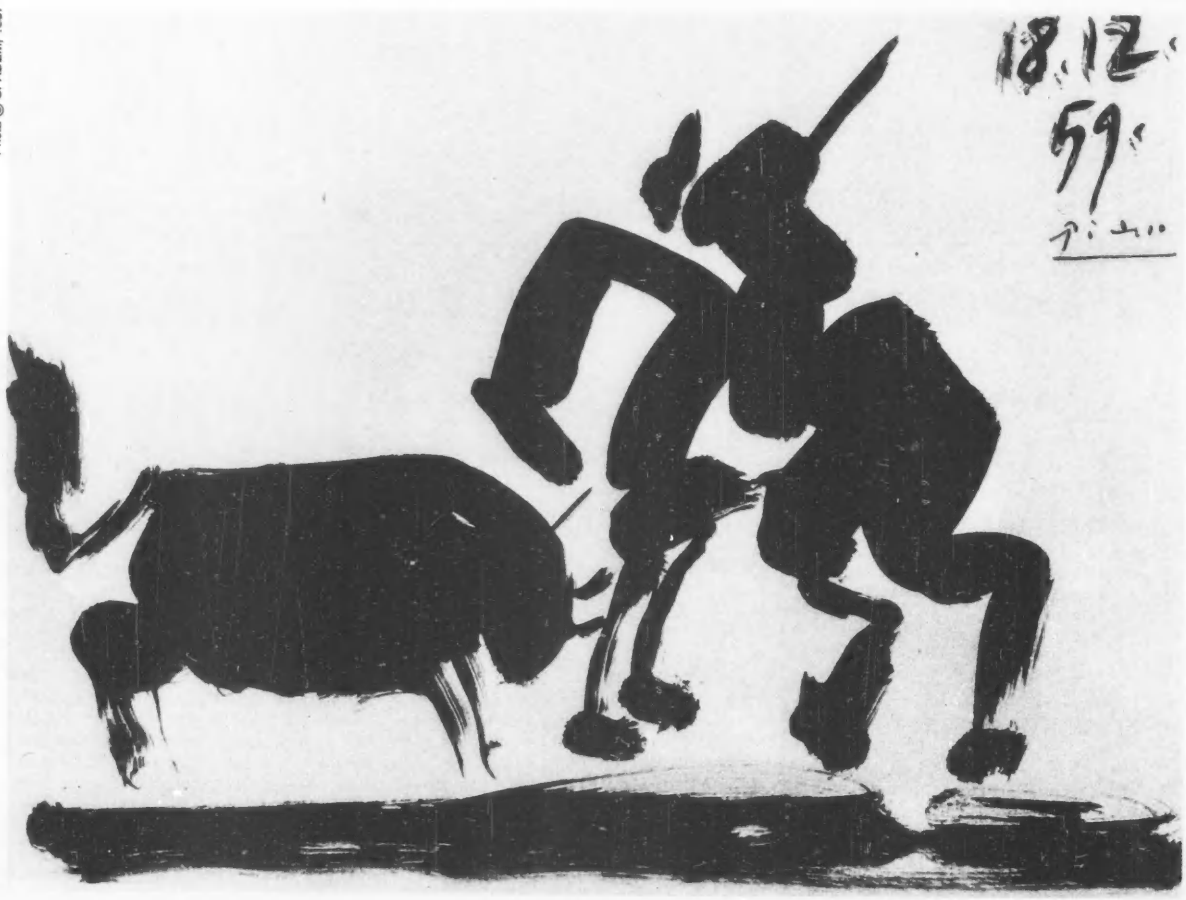


Photo © SPADEM, 1987

Grimacing masks by the Belgian artist James Ensor (1860-1949), in an oil painting entitled *Intrigues*.

tume is reminiscent of the clown's get-up and his flour-white face.

Fortunately, the only reminders of the bonfires that blazed at the time of the Inquisition are the straightjacket and the cowl worn by the condemned. And there is a curious resemblance between these garments and the attire of the figures of Pulchinello painted two centuries later by Giandomenico Tiépolo. The conical cap is the same as the dunce's cap once worn by restless and rebellious children. Even today clowns often enter the ring wearing this unjustly derided headgear. Just as the alchemist's cap became the Phrygian bonnet of the French Republic, so the conical cap of the heretic became the cap of the clown. Once more tragedy is inextricably linked with comedy.

But in any case the grotesque is always a dominant feature of the circus, whose entire imagery is contained in grimacing cathedral gargoyles and in twelfth-century illuminated bestiaries, perpetuated in the works of Gaudí and Borges respectively. The circus is Gothic, Romantic, Baroque and surrealist. It is certainly not classical, for its spirit is too mischievous for serenity. It is predominantly Faustian to the extent that it seems to have become a favourite theme of German literature.

Nietzsche, in *Thus Spake Zarathustra,* chose the acrobat walking the tightrope as a symbol of domination. The superman is a tightrope walker: "He is a lightning flash; he is a madman", as Nietzsche puts it. This is a variation of the exploit of Icarus, or of Goethe's Faust—the flight to the impossible. The theme recurs in Rilke; the fifth of his *Duino Elegies* is a tribute to trapeze artistes who catch each other in mid-air. This circus tradition in German literature can be traced from Thomas Mann's *Mario and the Magician* to Günther Grass's *Tin Drum,* and includes Heinrich Böll's *The Clown.*

In the Middle Ages, the very idea of the circus seemed destined to disappear. Paradoxically, however, the Angel of the Extraordinary survived extermination. The liturgical drama of the Church and the secular ritual of the courts were, ultimately, a kind of circus. And between these two ceremonies was the irrepressible street festival, the carnival, that was to be seen everywhere. There was much circus in the medieval carnival, as can be seen in Pieter Brueghel the Elder's *Fight Between Carnival and Lent.* Hiëronymus Bosch and Albrecht Dürer also painted pictures of carnivals and circuses inspired by the fifteenth-century humanist Sebastian Brant's allegorical poem *The Ship of Fools.* And these same fools, with their caps and bells and their asses' ears, waving their baubles and banners, are figures from the medieval French satirical plays known as *Sotties,* halfway between buffoons and clowns. Erasmus was probably thinking of them when he wrote *In Praise of Folly.* Bosch takes up the same theme in *The Conjurer* who plies his trade at a fair, and in *The Cure of Folly,* which depicts a surgeon wearing a funnel for a hat, and a nun with a book on her head. Pure circus.

In the seventeenth century the Flemish painter David Teniers the Younger often painted pictures of festivals in which the villagers chose a mock king, with a cardboard crown; this was a satire on authority. From then on the country fête became a common theme in painting, from Rubens' *Kermesses,* to Watteau's *fêtes galantes,* which contain echoes of pantomime, Goya's *Burial of the Sardine,* in which the painter mocks obscurantism, and James Ensor's brightly coloured masks.

In a period when laughter was suspect and weeping was thought to be in good taste, the god of laughter lurked in disguise on religious feast-days such as Christmas and Epiphany, turning up in medieval miracle and mystery plays, in festivals and when folly was tolerated, at the carnival, which later crossed the ocean to America, where the Day of the Kings was celebrated. The drum-playing and the Yoruba dances which the Negro slaves took to the New World were other manifestations of the spirit of the circus, which is the impulse towards the Dionysian paganism that Savonarola attacked at the height of the Renaissance with his "burning of the vanities".

Tournaments also had something of the circus in them. Equestrian pageants which might be described as a sport with erotic overtones, they were the last survivals of the horse-races and gladiatorial combats of

Antiquity. The spirit of the circus can also be glimpsed in medieval miniatures, in the fairy-like damsels with their hoods and wide veils, who wander among round tents adorned with coloured pennants, forerunners of the Big Top. Perhaps the best-known example of this spirit is to be found in the famous unicorn tapestries in the Cluny Museum, in Paris, one of which depicts a lady, surrounded by birds, rabbits, monkeys, dogs and lions, coming out of a multicoloured tent. She is wearing a feathered turban which makes her look like a sultan's wife, or a snake-charmer worthy of *The Thousand and One Nights*.

The Cluny tapestries, like flying carpets, transport us to the imaginary circuses, floating animals and fantastic Gypsy caravans of Marc Chagall's paintings. It would be interesting to study the development of the tent from the studded medieval pavilion of the Battle of Roncevalles to the Big Top in Ingmar Bergman's film *Sawdust and Tinsel*. I suspect that Gypsies played a substantial part in it. Even today, in the streets of Madrid, the Gypsies shake their tambourines around a bear dancing on a barrel, and fortune-tellers read the hands of passers-by in the Paris Flea Market. Any Gypsy has the circus in his blood because he is an outsider and because both his clothing and his way of life are exaggerated, out of the ordinary.

Exaggeration is the key word. Arcimboldo, with his heads made up of plants, Rabelais with his erotic humour, his eschatological jubilation and his insatiable greed, Brueghel and Bosch with their diabolical fantasms—all these were faithful to the spirit of the circus in the best possible way, unconsciously. And isn't it appropriate that a misshapen dwarf, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, should have produced a series of circus paintings? His self-portrait is a true caricature of a clown, with its exaggerated mouth, pathetic spectacles, squashed bowler hat, and nose like an aubergine from an Arcimboldo head. Everything in the work of Toulouse-Lautrec, the aristocrat who lived with outsiders, recalls the circus, whose secret mysteries are revealed only to artists and children.

The circus has obvious links with the cinema, and vice versa. As early as the eighteenth century, the magic lantern was an attraction at French fairs. In its early days, the cinema drew inspiration mainly from the scenic and dramatic wealth of the circus, the cabaret and the music-hall. The ambiguity of the circus may be its weakness or its strength: neither an art nor a sport, neither Athens nor Sparta, for ever vacillating in the no-man's-land between aesthetic fervour and muscular skill.

In the declining days of their empire, the Romans asked their emperors for "bread and circuses". Today, civilized societies settle for "bread and cinemas" or, worse still, for "bread and television". The fantasms of the circus live on in video-clips and even in advertisements. They startle us in the streets with punk hair-styles and clothes, or when rock concerts resound through a space several times the size of the Coliseum, amid coloured lights, clouds of smoke and shrieks. Not only are the singers disguised as clowns, marquises or Martians—some call themselves "Prince" or "Queen", a reminder that the clown Coquinet, the jester of Burgundy, was once appointed minister by his prince. Long before that, Caligula had proclaimed his horse a consul. History is full of tightrope walkers.

There are craters in the moon which, from afar, look like open-air circus rings. Perhaps, one day in the not too distant future, an intergalactic troupe will appear in one of them. Perhaps indescribable wonders will then be seen, as in the films of Steven Spielberg, who is in many ways close to the circus. Holography and laser beams, computer science, optical fibres and quantum mechanics will perhaps make it possible to change Pliny's giraffe into Aeschylus's tortoise. Perhaps such a fantastic trick will give free rein to the concentrated liberty of the circus. ■

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"What do you say to the public at the end of the show?"
"What d'you say to the public, my dear Mimile? You say goodbye, of course."
"Wrong, Boulicot. You never say goodbye to the public, you say here's to the next time!"

The Cirque Medrano, Paris, 1954

Dialogue between two French clowns, Emile Recordier (1890-1946) and Alphonse Boullicot (1878-1957), known as "Boulicot"
Histoire illustrée des cirques parisiens d'hier et d'aujourd'hui, Paul Adrian Publications, Paris, 1957 (out of print)

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